

DOTD secretary says state must consider tolls

BY WILL SENTELL

Capitol news bureau

Tolls should be one of the options when the state builds new roads, Louisiana's transportation chief said.

"Tolls need to be looked at," said William Ankner, secretary of the state Department of Transportation and Development.

"We need to look at how we are going to finance our transportation system in this state," Ankner

► Group seeks increase in road aid. 7A



er said.

"And the gas tax is not a viable way of financing transportation here or nationally," he added during a 45-minute interview.

Ankner stopped short of sug-

Ankner

gesting tolls as a financing option now for any specific road or bridge project.

However, he said, tolls belong on the list of options amid an environment of high gasoline prices, reduced revenue from the state gasoline tax and major questions about the future level of federal highway aid.

Ankner said the issue has been highly controversial in Louisiana, especially when it surfaced two years ago.

Former state Transportation Secretary Johnny Bradberry set off a political firestorm in 2006 when he filed a request with federal officials to impose tolls on Interstate 10 and Interstate 12. Then-Gov. Kathleen Blanco quickly ruled out the proposal amid heavy criticism of the idea.

Tolls are one of the components in plans for a proposed \$4-billion loop around Baton Rouge.

But he said, in that case, tolls

were discussed "across the board" as opposed to using them as a way to help finance certain new projects.

► See TOLLS, page 7A

TOLLS

Continued from page 1A

That revenue is supposed to account for half or more of the costs, one of the engineers involved in the planning said.

Senate Transportation Committee Chairman Joe McPherson, D-Woodworth, said he has heard that tolls were one of the financing tools under review in the state transportation department.

It makes sense, McPherson said, when the public is willing to pay extra for at least part of the project costs.

However, he noted that toll revenue rarely accounts for more than half of the building costs. "Otherwise you overburden the commuter," McPherson said.

Ankner said tolls are only part of any financial package when it comes to building roads.

Derrell Cohoon, a consultant for Associated General Contractors, said it makes sense for the state to consider tolls when it comes to building new roads, despite past criticism of the idea.

"From my perspective, toll roads were never off the radar," Cohoon said.

Louisiana motorists pay 38.4 cents per gallon of gas in state

and federal taxes. That includes 16 cents in state taxes for rank-and-file projects and 4 cents to finance 16 projects approved by voters in 1989.

That list includes the \$409 million John James Audubon Bridge over the Mississippi River between St. Francisville and New Roads. Ankner said it is set to open in the summer of 2010.

However, revenue from the state gas tax is down 7 percent — roughly \$35 million — and that trend is expected to continue.

Earlier this year, the Legislature approved a bill that will gradually boost state aid for roads and bridges by \$320 million per year.

Highways also got a \$400 million injection of aid earlier this year because of Louisiana's hurricane-driven budget surplus.

Without those funds, Ankner said, Louisiana would be trimming plans for new roads like Texas, Arkansas, Mississippi and Alabama are doing.

However, Ankner said that while he had initial questions about the figure, he now believes the state has a highway backlog of \$14 billion or so.

That includes \$8 billion for road and bridge maintenance — which he said is a vital if unglamorous need — and \$6 bil-

lion in new and improved roads. "We have a sizeable backlog," he said. "It is certainly in the range of \$12 billion or \$14 billion."

Last month, two state lawmakers said they will push to accelerate plans to gradually

boost state aid to highways by \$320 million, which take full effect in seven years.

State Rep. Eddie Lambert, R-Prairieville and vice chairman of the House Appropriations Committee, and state Rep. Bodi White, R-Central and a member

of the panel, said they plan to push legislation that would make the increased aid effective in 2010 or 2011.

Ankner said the decision rests with state budget leaders and will be based on Louisiana's overall financial picture.

The Advocate ■ Sunday, October 5, 2008 ■ 7A