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BGR MEDIA RELEASE

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BGR Examines New Bridge Tolls, Takes Position Against Proposition

Today BGR releases *On the Ballot: The Crescent City Connection Toll Proposition*. The report examines tolls on the bridge in the context of the new toll proposition, which will appear on the Nov. 6 ballot in Jefferson, Orleans and Plaquemines parishes. It concludes by taking a position against the new tolls. The analysis will be part of BGR's larger report on an array of ballot items, to be released early this fall.

In 2011, BGR published [*Over the River: The Future of the Crescent City Connection Bridge and Ferries*](#). That report recommended letting the current toll program expire at the end of this year, as scheduled.

Since then, circumstances have changed, and the proposition would create a different toll program. For instance, the scope of toll expenditures would be different. And, in the recent legislative session, the Legislature eliminated a dedication of funds to the bridge that had stood for decades. Because of such changes, BGR approached the matter with fresh eyes.

Under the proposition, toll revenues could be used only on the bridge and "along" the rest of U.S. 90Z, which includes a portion of the Pontchartrain Expressway and all of the Westbank Expressway. The revenue would be dedicated solely to the following purposes: "operations, maintenance,

landscaping, grass cutting, trash pickup, functional and ornamental lighting, policing, inspections, motorist assistance patrols and capital projects on the bridge, approaches and roadways.” If voters approve the proposition, tolls will be in place for the next 20 years. If voters reject the measure, tolls on the bridge will expire at the end of this year.

The tolls would provide a dedicated source of funding for infrastructure investments at the local level. Over 20 years, they would, if properly directed, provide at least \$200 million for capital projects on the bridge and its approaches, some of which would address high priorities for the region. It is unclear whether the state would or could provide a similar level of funding to the bridge and connecting roadways without the tolls.

However, the proposition contains some basic problems. Areas of concern include the scope of the electorate, the vagueness of the proposition and uncertainty about what the public would receive with tolls, versus what it would receive without them.

BGR opposes the proposition, finding that the need for continued tolls has not been established. The tolls would cover many expenses that the state would otherwise meet from other funding sources available for those purposes. The State Police have stated that they will assume responsibility for patrolling the bridge regardless of whether their patrols are subsidized by tolls. Likewise, the state has indicated that it will inspect, maintain and repair the bridge regardless of whether there are tolls. The extent to which the state would fund the capital projects related to U.S. 90Z without tolls is uncertain.

There is another uncertainty about future expenditures that prevents voters from making an informed decision. Because of the vagueness of the proposition and accompanying legislation, the geographical limits on the expenditure of toll funds are open to interpretation.

The fiscal impacts of lighting expenses on the individual local jurisdictions have not been quantified. However, the current expenditures for lighting total \$800,000, a fraction of the \$20 million per year that would be collected through tolls. Furthermore, there will be enough money

in a Transition Fund, comprised of surplus funds from the current toll program, to cover these costs for about eight years, and possibly longer. This will provide plenty of time for local jurisdictions to work out a strategy to fund lighting.

Finally, drivers need not fear that the bridge will become unsafe. Under federal law, the state must regularly inspect the bridge to ensure proper maintenance and immediately address any safety-related deficiencies. Even if that were not the case, it is unlikely that the state would fail to prioritize one of its most vital arteries.

BGR Chairman Sterling Scott Willis pointed out that no other Mississippi River bridge within the state has tolls. He said an unknown portion of the toll revenue will go toward expenses that the state would otherwise cover, meaning New Orleans-area drivers would indirectly subsidize the rest of the state.

“The proposed tolls are a long-term commitment for drivers in the New Orleans area,” Mr. Willis said. “Without a clear picture of what benefits tolls would yield, voters cannot be expected to make such a commitment.”

The report is available at www.bgr.org.

BGR is a private, nonprofit, independent research organization. Since its founding in 1932, it has been dedicated to informed public policy-making and the effective use of public resources in the Greater New Orleans area. For more information call 525-4152 or visit BGR's website, www.bgr.org.