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The Future is Now: Commuters can't afford to lose \$500M down payment on new Mississippi River bridge

Capital Region legislative delegation urged to unite to secure the top Louisiana transportation priority for the Baton Rouge Area

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Key Takeaways:

- Baton Rouge has the fourth worst traffic in the US; this project is an urgent statewide crisis.
- Capital Region unity and consensus have brought real progress on infrastructure; more needed now.
- New MS River bridge and connectors can start design/construction within three years.
- Upfront funds as down-payment are necessary to find financing partners next year.
- Final bridge locations will be selected by this summer.
- 2018 online survey showed 70% support for toll financing to help pay for a new MS River bridge.

In 2021, the TomTom annual traffic index [report](#) ranked the Baton Rouge Area as having the fourth-worst traffic congestion in the country. This ranking is behind only the much larger metropolitan areas of New York City, Los Angeles, and Miami, and ahead of Houston, Atlanta, San Francisco, and Chicago. And based on their calculations, TomTom noted that Baton Rouge commuters lost an average of 64 hours per year due to traffic congestion. The ranking may come as little surprise to those who regularly navigate driving in Baton Rouge, but it is still jarring to contemplate the comparisons and such a precise estimation of the time lost annually by each of us in productivity, family time, and quality of life.

Moreover, a national ranking showing a megalopolis-scale bottleneck in the heart of Louisiana underscores a problem that's not only regional in nature but one that impacts the entire state.

Which is why, on January 24 of this year, when Governor Edwards [announced](#) a proposed budget for the upcoming fiscal year that included \$500 million toward a new Mississippi River bridge in Baton Rouge, it was a major relief, an historic commitment, and represented the culmination of six years of data-driven, unified advocacy among Capital Region businesses, planning groups, elected officials, and, most importantly, commuters.

As the Governor's announcement stated, "critical state investments" like this "benefit our communities and will create economic opportunity across Louisiana," while the "funding will go a long way in improving the lives and livelihoods of our people."

But while the Governor's commitment marked the culmination of great collective effort in one sense, in another sense it marked just the beginning of a renewed effort to safeguard that profound down payment. After all, the Governor's proposal is just that – a proposal. For seemingly no sooner had the ink dried on his budget proposal before some legislators from around the state began voicing skepticism about the proposal and signaling an intent to raid the funds.

Such a move would be shortsighted and harmful, not only to the Capital Region but to Louisiana as a whole, as it would demonstrate the state's inability to make long-term critical investments, even at a time when the state's financial outlook is brighter than it's been in years.

In response, it is more important than ever that Capital Region businesses, planning groups, commuters, and, most importantly, its legislative delegation remain unified in securing these funds for a transformational project that is, in fact, not as far off on the time horizon as critics claim. The irony, of course, is that this \$500 million down payment will only accelerate the project's implementation. Losing it would constitute a major setback.

Those are the stakes involved, and this analysis hopes to shed more light on why the future is now.

Consensus is a powerful force for good

To understand the historic nature of this recent commitment toward a new Mississippi River bridge, one has only to think back less than a decade to a time when the possibility of major Capital Region infrastructure investments appeared nowhere in sight.

By 2015, while transportation infrastructure needs across the state were sizable, the situation in the Capital Region had grown particularly, even uniquely, dire among the state's metropolitan areas, as the rankings testify. And although the Baton Rouge Area then accounted for roughly 18 percent of the state's total population, its share of the transportation maintenance backlog, at \$3.3 billion, accounted for more than a quarter of the total statewide need, and almost half of the state's bridge backlog.

And yet for years, even as the congestion and condition of its roads worsened, the Capital Region missed out on major infrastructure investments, in part because the region lacked consensus over its highest priority projects.

That began to change in February 2016, when CRISIS, the Baton Rouge area regional business-led coalition for transportation improvements, released a [report](#) detailing the findings and results of an analysis of major Capital Region transportation infrastructure projects. Commissioned by CRISIS, the analysis was led by the Capital Region Planning Commission (CRPC) and its transportation planners, to begin to forge regional consensus based on data-driven solutions.

To conduct the analysis, a team of CRISIS representatives, parish presidents, legislators, and CRPC staff identified projects with regional significance for analysis, with consideration given to all regional projects in the State Long Range Plan. Then, 18 major transportation projects were analyzed using a regional transportation model for comparative analysis. Key metrics used included each project's projected reduction in congestion, or regional Vehicle Hours of Travel (VHT), along with "best available" cost estimates done in conjunction with DOTD, to arrive at ratios of "congestion relief for the cost" for comparison.

Findings of the analysis concluded that:

- Multiple projects were needed for regional congestion relief.
- The best projects based on cost-benefit, or congestion relief for the dollar, involved widening I-10 from Baton Rouge through Ascension Parish, and expanding both directions of I-10 through Baton Rouge.
- The highest benefit (most congestion relief) project would involve construction of a new crossing for the Mississippi River (a new bridge, with connectors, and widening of LA 30).

While most would agree that “another transportation study,” if not followed up by action, is not the most exciting development in the world, what followed the release of this report, by contrast, has been exciting indeed. Not insignificantly, for the first time in years the Capital Region had a data-driven blueprint for the highest-priority projects that could result in significant congestion relief. But more importantly, Louisiana’s elected officials, at the local and state levels, but particularly the Capital Region legislative delegation, rallied to support the funding and construction of this blueprint with unprecedented consensus and collaboration.

And the results of this consensus and collaboration have been more than promising:

- Within two years of the publication of the CRISIS study, funding was secured, planning and design completed, and construction began on a \$72 million project to widen I-10 from four lanes to six lanes from Highland Road in Baton Rouge, through Ascension parish, to the LA 73 interchange in Prairieville, including replacing two overpass bridges and raising another. Construction was completed in [October 2020](#).
- For the I-10 project to add a new lane in both directions through Baton Rouge from the Mississippi River bridge to the I-10/I-12 split, in 2018 state and federal officials finalized an agreement to use over \$350 million in GARVEE bonds toward the project. And while more funds will be needed to cover all segments of the project, a \$52 million College Drive flyover is expected to be completed by the end of this year, with major construction on the 3.5-mile segment on I-10 Eastbound from the bridge past Acadian Thruway set to begin by early 2024.

As promising as this progress is, these projects are not a silver bullet for solving Capital Region congestion. As the CRISIS report outlined, multiple projects are needed, and the blueprint cannot nearly be considered carried out without including construction of a new Mississippi River bridge – the project estimated to reduce the most regional congestion, saving up to 1.4 million total vehicle hours annually depending on the location.

Time is money/money is time: Or, answering the skeptics

As we’ve seen with the I-10 project through Baton Rouge, securing a significant down payment can accelerate planning and construction – a fact reflected in Gov. Edwards’ address to open the 2022 legislative session, when he said, in reference to his proposed funding commitment to the Mississippi River bridge, that “the funds we are receiving from the federal government will allow us to catapult big-ticket projects from talk to action.”

In the days since the session started on March 14, certain skeptics (as dubbed by the press) have already started questioning this premise, pointing out problems that, on closer inspection, have more holes in them than the ones they seek to poke into the Governor’s proposal. For instance, one skeptic wondered “how a \$500 million commitment for the bridge would affect other spending priorities, including paid family and medical leave” – even though the type of one-time funding being allocated to the construction project cannot be used for such a recurring, social spending program. Perhaps the most prominent critique of the proposal comes from those who on the one hand claim they “fully support” the bridge, but on the other have a problem with allocating the dollars for a project that is “five-plus years away” from activity, when the project timeline is already well underway (see chart below). That critique either misconstrues some facts or overlooks others, like:

- The data-driven identification of the three most viable sites for the bridge is ongoing and will be completed this summer, at which point the environmental review process will begin immediately. At least two to three viable bridge locations are necessary for the federal environmental process (Record of Decision) and for multiple, necessary choices for the public-private partner.
- Selecting a location or the environmental process, importantly, will not delay DOTD from reaching a key agreement to select the public-private partner (P3) for the bridge within the next 18 months, setting the stage for design/construction to begin in 2025 – within three years, not “five-plus.”
- While some members of the legislature may see a construction completion target for the end of the decade as too far beyond their horizon of contemplation, BRAC’s research on the issue of retaining young Louisiana

talent and input from area young professionals indicates that they do not share that short-term myopia and do not think 2031 is too far in the future for transforming the region’s quality of life not only for themselves, but also for their future children.

- The \$500 million will boost the state’s chances of securing federal grants and matching dollars and other sources of funding that will reduce the project’s timeline as well as the price tag for Louisiana taxpayers.

The Future Is Now: Expected Bridge Timeline	
Date	Progress Step
Summer 2022	3 bridge locations and corridors selected. At least 2-3 viable alternatives required for Record of Decision and P3 partners
Fall 2022	Necessary federal environmental review begins to secure Record of Decision (ROD) for bridge constructability. Mandatory (maximum) 2-year NEPA period for expedited review by 2024.
2023	Bid and selection of toll financing private partner for predevelopment agreement. Necessary input for ROD.
2024	Final Record of Decision. Federal environmental approval.
2024–25	Negotiate and sign contract for design-build construction of bridge
2025	Design and construction of new MS River Bridge begins
2030–31	Bridge construction complete

The most recent cut against the proposal contends that placing tolls on I-10 “sets a bad precedent for the country,” raising doubts that people are “going to be supportive of this,” ignoring the fact that:

- The proposed tolls to utilize the bridge and its connectors will not actually be on I-10, but for bypassing a stretch of it.
- The use of tolls for a public-private partnership (or P3) project would be far from precedent-setting, but have been commonly used throughout North America to reduce costs to taxpayers and help keep projects on time and on budget.
- Since the inception of this new bridge project, every public meeting, every financial plan, and every discussion of it that included legislators and local elected officials have all always presented tolls as part of the financing stack. A 2017 DOTD study on its tolling feasibility supported that rationale with detailed analysis.
- In fact, in a daily online poll conducted in September 2018 by the Baton Rouge Business Report, with 1,011 respondents to the question – “Would you pay a toll to use a new Mississippi River bridge in Baton Rouge?” – some 70.5 percent responded “yes,” 15.5 percent said it “would depend on the price,” while only 14 percent voted “no.”
- We also know that the final federal environmental approval, expected in 2024, will not be possible without a financial plan, and that financial plan must be financed (from multiple public and private sources), or all of the cash must be available on hand. Without tolling, the bridge will not receive its final Record of Decision, or federal environmental approval, in 2024, essentially stalling the project.

Finally, some of the recent discussion has centered on the Governor's \$500 million allocation itself. In reviewing the project price-tag, DOTD has pointed out that the \$500 million is critical not only to starting serious discussions with private bridge funders in the next 18 months, but also to the price of toll. The more public committed to the entire scope of the project, including its connectors, the more reasonable will be the price that drivers pay for the toll.

History has its eyes on us

In all honesty, it's not surprising that certain legislators from around the state would size up the \$500 million commitment for the Mississippi River bridge not as a symbol of great progress toward a statewide priority, but as a target for syphoning off the money for their own districts or policy preferences. After all, that's part of their job.

But at the same time, residents of the Baton Rouge Area, especially legislators of the Capital Region delegation, must be prepared to respond – with facts, persuasion, and determination – when skeptics throw all manner of criticisms against the wall to see what sticks.

This long-awaited \$500 million proposal for the bridge has been called a “once-in-a-lifetime opportunity,” but the flipside, should it fail, is that we and future generations of Louisianans may all look back at 2022 in awful wonder about how the chance was squandered. To paraphrase another famous call to unity, let's come together now to preserve the blessings of this bridge, both for ourselves and our posterity. The future is now.