

ANOTHER VIEW

Louisiana's 'great connector' deserves praise

It's not often that one can offer unre-served praise for a piece of Louisiana infrastructure.

But when it comes to the Lake Ponchartrain Causeway, the plaudits are well-deserved.

The bridge, dual strands of concrete ribbon that stretch the roughly 24 miles between Jefferson Parish on the south shore and St. Tammany on the north, turns 70 on Aug. 29. It remains as much of a marvel today as it was the day it was completed.

The Causeway is the longest continuous bridge over water in the world, and the longest bridge in the United States. (Louisiana is a good place for lengthy spans — four of the five longest in the country are here.)

Its construction was a remarkable piece of engineering and logistics born of a 1952 Louisiana constitutional amendment that authorized the two parishes to build the bridge without federal support, financed through tolls.

Construction on the first span began in 1954 and was completed in just 19 months. Tolls were \$1 in each direction. A second span opened in 1969.

The effect on southeast Louisiana has been nigh on immeasurable.

"Throughout my lifetime, it's been the great connector," said Carlton Dufrechou, for nearly 17 years now the head of the Greater New Orleans Expressway Commission, which operates the bridge.



Faimon Roberts

Dufrechou oversees an agency that has grown over the decades to now include a 30-officer police force and motorist assistance patrol. The Causeway is manned 24 hours per day, including with someone who can open the bascule, the drawbridge mechanism that allows tall ships to pass through about eight miles south of the north shore.

For frequent Causeway commuters, including me, the bridge lives in two opposed mental realms. Yes, driving 24 miles in a straight line can be mind-numbingly boring. But it's only boring because it's so consistent. Traffic moves, speed is monitored and incidents are handled quickly and efficiently. When it's foggy, cones and convoys may slow drivers down, but for the most part, they keep them safe.

It's that last quality that makes Du-

frechou the proudest. Per mile, he says, it's the safest stretch along the Gulf Coast, and perhaps across the nation.

Railings on the older southbound span that were installed in 2021 have cut what Dufrechou refers to as "overboards" — crashes where a car goes into the lake — to zero. Between 1994 and 2021, there were 19 such crashes, including 13 fatalities. All but two were on the southbound bridge.

In addition, safety pullover areas, installed at the same time as the new railings, have reduced annual crashes from about 180 to about 130, Dufrechou said.

And though it's 70 years old this month, Dufrechou said the regular maintenance and annual inspections have kept it in as good a shape as it was during the Eisenhower administration.

"It's as robust today as it was when it was opened," Dufrechou said. And then, perhaps unintentionally, he echoed the thought of many a commuter just getting on the bridge.

"It can go on forever," he said.

Email Faimon A. Roberts III at froberts@theadvocate.com.