

One West Bank man got fed up with tolls and didn't - Times-Picayune, The (New Orleans, LA) - March 10, 2013 - page A 01

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ike **Teachworth** says it's never been about 40 cents or \$1. It's about fairness.

At least for now, a trip across the Crescent City Connection is toll free after **Teachworth** won an unprecedented ruling this week that nullified the November referendum extending bridge tolls for 20 years. That decision also suspended toll collection and set a new vote on the issue in eight weeks.

But **Teachworth** knows the fight isn't over yet. The nation's fifth-busiest bridge generated \$22 million in tolls annually, the pot of money at the center of the contentious election which drew more than 308,000 people from Orleans, Jefferson and Plaquemines parishes to the polls.

"I hope that everybody on the West Bank understands this is a once-in-a-lifetime opportunity. It's our chance to turn off a tax," **Teachworth** said. "I know the other side has a lot of money. They are coming. They are not going to take any of this lying down."

After the referendum passed by a scant margin, **Teachworth** sued, alleging that hundreds of legally registered voters were denied their right to vote on the issue when they were given provisional ballots, restricting their participation to federal elections. With a 36-vote margin favoring approval, it was impossible to determine the outcome of the election when so many voters were left disenfranchised, his suit argued.

Judge William Morvant of the 19th Judicial District in Baton Rouge agreed Tuesday, throwing out the results and setting a May 4 do-over, which could eliminate the tolls, first imposed in 1989, for good.

Political pollster Silas Lee said the ruling reiterates the message that participation in democracy is sacred.

"You had such a clear case of all voters not having the ability to vote on an issue that was the major problem," Lee said.

Gretna attorney G. Patrick Hand III, who represented **Teachworth** in the lawsuit, called his client the "catalyst" for bringing the anti-toll movement together. The pair often found themselves communicating into the early morning hours in preparation for an unsuccessful February recount and last week's trial.

"He's an honest guy who got fed up with the system," Hand said.

While many West Bankers celebrated Morvant's ruling, **Teachworth** of Harvey was more circumspect about what remains.

"It's been difficult," he said. "It's been a long haul. We've got to win this election."

By day, he is a consulting executive for IBM. Married to Jeanne **Teachworth**, an emergency room nurse at West Jefferson Medical Center, the couple has four adult children.

A lifelong West Bank resident, Jeanne **Teachworth** has seen the rollercoaster her husband has been on for the past several months.

Teachworth, 52, is personally liable for \$5,000 in expenses associated with the recount ordered as a result of his lawsuit. His questioning elicited a threatening phone call and messages, but it did nothing to dissuade him, Jeanne **Teachworth** said.

"He's very passionate about it," she said. "He wasn't ever really ready to quit."

'We were David and Goliath'

Aggravation over crossing the bridge each day with very little infrastructure to improve traffic congestion got him involved in the issue around 2009.

"I was sitting in traffic one morning. I said 'Why are we waiting in traffic? Why do we pay?' " **Teachworth** said.

Shortly afterward, he read a newspaper article in which Connick was raising questions about bridge spending. They met at a civic association meeting, where Connick said he told **Teachworth** to get involved if he wanted to make a difference.

"He took it and ran with it," said Connick, a frequent critic of Crescent City Connection operations who is credited with uncovering questionable spending of some bridge revenues. "It shows an average citizen can do a lot by being active in the process. He's smart. He's driven."

Teachworth created an organization, Stop the **Tolls**, and a website, where he posted articles and information about the bridge. He also served on the legislative task force charged with making recommendations.

After months of controversy, including disagreement over their mission and advice from an unlicensed attorney, the panel recommended continuing the **tolls** early last year. **Teachworth** was the lone task force member in opposition.

He ramped up his role in the anti-toll movement with his website, knocked on doors, distributed yard signs and spoke to neighborhood groups.

Meanwhile, Bridging Progress, a regional political action committee of business and elected officials, launched a \$200,000 high-profile media blitz in support of the **tolls**, saying they were critical to maintaining the bridge, a key to economic development.

"I was afraid that we were going to get crushed. We saw they had raised \$200,000. I knew they had statisticians," **Teachworth** said. "We were ragtag. We didn't know what we were doing. We were

David and Goliath."

United the West Bank

When the toll renewal passed Nov. 6 by a paper-thin margin, he said he decided he would sue. There were too many questions about how ballots were tallied in Orleans Parish into the early morning hours of Nov. 7, he said.

Then people began to complain on his website they couldn't vote on the issue because they were given paper ballots that lacked the referendum.

"We're going to fight to the end," **Teachworth** said he told himself at the time.

He credited Hand with putting together a solid case that included nearly a dozen voters given provisional ballots and relentlessly researching state law.

But Hand also warned **Teachworth** he would have to pay for costs out of pocket in the lawsuit that named Gov. Bobby Jindal and Secretary of State Tom Schedler as defendants.

"The Hand law firm stepped up. I didn't pay them anything. They did it for the West Bank," **Teachworth** said.

Hand was as complimentary of **Teachworth**.

"He doesn't need notoriety or money," he said. "He didn't do that for any of those things."

Perhaps the most important thing is that the issue united the West Bank, Jeanne **Teachworth** said.

"We're proud to live on the West Bank," she said. "We're proud of our community. I'm glad there is something he's able to do to give back."

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