

Toll-free Crescent City Connection drama far from - Times-Picayune, The: Web Edition Articles (New Orleans, LA) - March 6, 2013

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With tolls suspended on the **Crescent City Connection**, West Bank commuters continued to celebrate crossing the nation's fifth busiest bridge without charge Wednesday, the day after last fall's election continuing the tolls was thrown out. Toll booths were empty and dark, while flashing billboards and small placards instructed motorists to keep moving.

"Toll Free. No stopping. 25 MPH."

State transportation officials lifted the tolls Tuesday evening after Judge William Morvant of the 19th Judicial District nullified the election, finding a number of legally registered voters were denied their right to cast ballots on the issue, when they were handed provisional ballots, limiting their participation to federal elections. Morvant also set a May 4 election date that will send voters in Orleans, Jefferson and Plaquemines parishes back to the polls.

More than 308,000 votes were cast Nov. 6, which coincided with the national election for president. With a margin of 36 votes favoring a 20-year extension of the tolls, Teachworth and his attorney, **G. Patrick Hand III**, argued that 1,000 people given provisional ballots could have reversed the election's outcome had they been allowed to participate on the local issue.

"It's a tragedy when you have people whose names were in the books to vote and they didn't get to vote," Hand said. "That could have made a difference. It's a \$450 million tax on the backs of primarily west bankers."

The tolls collected from east bank bound motorists cost \$1 cash for most vehicles and 40 cents with a toll tag. Commuters generated nearly \$22 million annually for bridge operations, maintenance, lighting and security.

Political pollster Silas Lee called Morvant's nullification of the election "a significant victory," but warned the drama is far from over.

Bridging Progress, a coalition of business leaders and elected officials, mounted a massive campaign in support of the tolls, arguing they were crucial to safety and economic development.

"It will be interesting to see what the strategy will be on both sides in this very short period," Lee said.