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AUDIT FOUND TOLLS WERE MISUSED

CONNICK, *from A-1*

No doubt, Connick's loud opposition to extending the tolls for another 20 years has ruffled feathers among his legislative colleagues, elected officials and business leaders who supported their continuation in the Nov. 6 referendum. But many acknowledge his scrutiny of the bridge's finances, regardless of the election's outcome, spurred a much-needed overhaul of the agency.

In the end, the toll extension was approved by a razor-thin margin: 18 votes out of more than 308,000 cast in Orleans, Jefferson and Plaquemines parishes. Jefferson and Plaquemines opposed the extension; Orleans, with the exception of Algiers, supported it.

"It wasn't about winning. It was about letting the facts and the truth come out and letting the public know where the money is going," Connick, 51, said. "We accept a lot. We shouldn't be accepting poor performance."

The toll referendum marked the first official campaign for Connick. Though he has worked to get family and friends elected to various posts, he was elected to the 84th House District, representing parts of Harvey and Marrero, in 2007, without opposition. Four years later, the Republican went unchallenged and won another term.

"He may have gotten in with the Connick name, but he got re-elected without opposition because he's Pat," former House Speaker Jim Tucker, R-Algiers, said. "I think his constituents appreciate the job that he is doing."

Charles Miller, a former president of the West Jefferson Civic Coalition, agreed.

"Pat has always opened his office and called meetings periodically to keep civic leaders informed and asked for our input," Miller said. "On a state level, Pat gives us a voice."

West Bank roots

John Patrick Connick Sr. is the youngest of eight children born to Paul and Betty Connick. Politics is the family business: His father, Paul Connick Sr., was an aide to five Jefferson Parish presidents; his uncle, Harry Connick, was Orleans Parish District Attorney; and his brother, Paul Connick Jr., is Jefferson Parish district attorney.

"Uncle Harry was a big influence. He had a solid reputation. All my uncles, my dad's brothers, were strong people who made sure we did the right thing or try to do the right thing," Pat Connick said. "We all fail at times."

Pat and his siblings were raised on Barataria Boulevard in Marrero near Hope Haven, a connection the family still maintains. Betty Connick, whose father emigrated from Holland at the request of Monsignor Peter Wynhoven, was born there and taught at the former home for orphans.

The future state representative graduated from Archbishop Shaw High School and then Loyola University, with a bachelor's degree in mass communications. He returned to Loyola for law school, attending classes at night, while working for Pacific Molasses during the day, while his wife, Rhonda, cared for their three young children.

Out of law school, he joined the Orleans Parish district attorney's office as a prosecutor.

"They really throw you into it. Those guys work hard, and the pay is terrible," he said. "But you really learn the process of a courtroom."

CHRIS GRANGER / STAFF PHOTOGRAPHER

State Rep. Patrick Connick, R-Harvey, and New Orleans at-large Councilwoman Jackie Clarkson, left, debate the bridge toll referendum during a Nov. 1 forum. Behind them is a photograph showing traffic backed up while trying to get onto the Crescent City Connection from the West Bank.

He also spent time in the Jefferson Parish district attorney's office before working with his brothers in private practice. "They had too many chiefs," Connick joked.

He went solo in 2002, specializing in personal injury cases.

Catalyst Katrina

Like it did for countless others across the region, Hurricane Katrina in 2005 became a catalyst of change for Connick. Although he had worked in a number of political campaigns, including those of his relatives, it was only after the storm that he decided to personally take the plunge.

He and his wife considered moving to the north shore or leaving Louisiana altogether. Their children were nearly grown, with one in college and two others headed that way.

But when son Patrick Jr. brought his friends from Notre Dame to volunteer in the recovery, the Connicks' decision quickly fell into place. They would stay and work to make the area a better place to live.

"They (students) came to help. It gave me encouragement, and it kind of recharged my battery," Pat Connick said. "The whole area was wiped out. I thought I could get involved and see what was going on and try to make a difference."

"That was his statement, 'I don't think we can stay here and not do something to make it a better place, seeing all these people come from all over the country to help,'" Rhonda Connick said.

It was then that Citizen Connick's thoughts turned to the Crescent City Connection. He said he saw vast amounts of money being collected, but noticed the grass going unmowed and trash littering the roadside. He filed public records requests about grass-cutting contracts.

"I could never get a direct, straight answer about who's getting paid what and why it wasn't getting cut," he said. "It was always excuses. I wanted to know why things couldn't be better."

Congressman Connick

That quest to understand the workings of the CCC would only intensify after winning a legislative seat in 2007. Using his legal background, Connick sought documents and began asking hard questions. In 2008, he and several other lawmakers asked the state legislative auditor to look at the bridge's finances.

During that audit, the Crescent City Connection's executive

DAVID GRUNFELD / STAFF PHOTOGRAPHER

Patrick and Rhonda Connick, who live in Harvey, have strong roots on the West Bank of Jefferson Parish.

director and assistant executive director both retired, citing personal reasons.

Several reports were issued, including one that found the agency ran up a $35 million deficit over five years and that its poor record-keeping made it difficult to determine how all the money was spent.

The audit also concluded that the CCC had bought a $4 million insurance policy that was unnecessary; projects had been approved without contracts; toll money was illegally used for expenses associated with the Leeville Bridge project; there were problems with the electronic tolling system; and a $3.8 million expansion of the bridge agency's administrative office was criticized as excessive.

"If you're going to get a government job or a government contract, you have to deliver," Connick said. "You just can't get the job or the contract and not perform. That needs to change. We deserve better."

Rhonda Connick recalled one day on the House floor her husband was met with a barrage of questions from legislators during a discussion on the bridge.

"He was getting beat up. He was a punching bag," she said, recalling her anger at the time. "But he was answering every question. They kept coming, and he had an answer for every one of them."

Connick laughed, noting that he grew up with five brothers.

"I told them (legislators), I'm used to getting beat up," he said.

But like a good prosecutor, Connick is always prepared, said his seatmate in Baton Rouge, Rep. Joe Lopinto, R-Metairie.

"He has spent an unbelievable amount of time over the last five years dealing with this one issue," Lopinto said. "There are members' desks in Baton Rouge that are clean as can be. Pat had every report, reading every one of them. His devotion to this issue is unbelievable. I'm glad I'm going to get some of my desk back."

"He does his homework," added Tucker, the former House speaker.

Voters weigh in

With the tolls set to expire in December and a legislative commission recommending a continuation of the tolls, legislators opted to punt the issue to voters, asking them for the first time ever Nov. 6 whether tolls should be extended. The initial tolls and an extension in 1998 had been approved by the Legislature.

Connick parlayed his arguments, using social media, into an organic movement that nearly defeated the referendum. He estimates anti-toll efforts spent about $14,000 compared to the $200,000 campaign funded by Bridging Progress, a political action committee of several influential business groups, including the Jefferson Business Council, Jefferson Chamber and Greater New Orleans Inc., that supported the tolls.

Several West Bank residents involved in the anti-toll effort said Connick was the reason they came so close to defeating the measure.

"I know he's endured quite a bit of pressure to stop revealing all the nonsense," said businessman John Roberts, who led more than 200 businesses against the tolls. "But he had the backbone to stand up. He deserves all the credit. He has been the driving force (and) has kept everyone motivated and kept working hard on the issue."

"He's one of the few willing to not crack under political pressure to back off the waste and corruption exposed," Miller said.

But Connick, himself, acknowledged his tenacity has rubbed some colleagues and local officials the wrong way.

"I'm sure I've made some enemies, but they'll get over it," he said. "I'm still learning the process of how to be more diplomatic and, at the same time, get my point across. It's one of the things Paul lectures me on."

"He has always had that streak in him," Paul Connick said. "He's very determined, very thorough. He's got a single mind."

That unyielding nature can make it difficult to work with regional colleagues, who together have a better chance at succeeding with a united front, Tucker said.

"Sometimes he won't compromise," Tucker said. "He's dogmatic. He fights to the bitter end. It makes it harder to work as a group. But he is always well-intentioned."

Although he's been the anti-toll effort's most public, sometimes passionate leader, Connick eschews the spotlight, those who know him say. Ultimately, what matters most are family and community.

"His drive is making his family proud and being accountable for his actions," Rhonda Connick said. "He wants to prove to us if you work hard and you do it for the right reason, the results will come. If they don't come, there's a reason. It's God's will and you will continue on."

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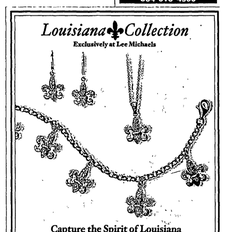

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