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Legal skill behind district's \$10 million win

Edmond Connor is used to fighting to save his clients from ferocious attorneys for disgruntled plaintiffs.

This time, though, the Irvine attorney was on the plaintiff's side.

Connor and his client, North Orange County Community College District, last week outfoxed Orange County's high-priced legal bullies and scored a \$10 million settlement from LeBoeuf, Lamb, Greene & MacRae, a New York law firm that did securities work for both the district and the county.

Connor swung the district through its malpractice battle with LeBoeuf as well as a political and legal firestorm from fellow plaintiffs who feared the district would scuttle the county's proposed \$45 million settlement with LeBoeuf.

What made the two-headed fight tolerable, Connor says, was the strength of the district's case. In 1994, the district hired LeBoeuf — which also



JONATHAN LANSNER

worked Wall Street dealings for the county — to oversee the legal nuances of a \$53 million bond sale. That casino bond money went to the ill-fated county investment pool.

LeBoeuf forgot to tell the district that in the month before that bond sale, the law firm was helping the county stave off a Securities and Exchange Commission probe into the investment pool's soundness. By year's end, the pool and the county were bankrupt, and the district was out \$7 million.

Angered by the legal betrayal and sensing little hope of full repayment from the county's own court fights, the district hired

Connor for its own suit against LeBoeuf. The marching orders: Make us whole, says Connor.

After nearly two decades of working for West Coast legal powerhouses, Connor set up his own shop in 1994 with dreams of such a textbook contingency case, where the attorney gets a cut of the bounty. But district trustees, fearing a potential attorney windfall, paid Connor by the hour — all told, \$1 million for 20 months of work.

It was money well spent, say the district brass, who credit the thoughtfulness and patience of Nebraska-raised Connor, 47, for their victory. "I could even understand what he wrote," says board President Nancy Rice.

That legal handiwork gained little serious notice until last autumn when the county's outside attorneys — representing the government and some 200 other pool investors — cut the \$45 million deal with LeBoeuf. There was one catch: The district's suit had to go away.

North Orange wasn't budging

to join a deal gaining it only \$2 million. Even threats of cuts in state and county funding didn't move the district.

Connor had prepared his clients for the long fight by predicting a settlement just before trial. And a deal came after the case was to start Feb. 27.

So how could one small college district get \$10 million when the clique of county powers may grab only \$45 million combined? Connor played part diplomat, conceivably reaching for skills that got him elected president of the local bar association for 1998: "We had a very good case. ... t would have been fun to take to trial."

Or one wonders whether the county's legal experts who bullied their way through the bankruptcy are now finding those heavy-handed maneuvers less successful in civil court?

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