

## My Race for Toledo Mayor

by Mike Ferner

Our campaign's unofficial slogan, emblazoned on 4x4-foot black and orange signs, was "Fix the DAMN Streets!"<sup>1</sup>

As expected, it caused a bit of a stir at first but within a few days it was common currency, even among reporters who began asking: "Where are you going to get the money to fix the damn streets?"

By definition, local elections are about local issues. But with a little extra effort and drawing on the wisdom of POCLAD colleagues and democracy activists over the years, we lifted the tone of the campaign above streets and sewers.

First off, I suggested, in each of 21 forums/"debates" we had in 10 weeks, that we should put the full case before the voters. We have \$14 million budgeted for street repair this year. City engineers say we really need \$60 million annually. Why not ask voters if they support a modest, two-year tax increase?

Simultaneously, a newly-hired organizer on the mayor's staff would start building a campaign among Ohio's cities to inform and mobilize elected officials and thousands of people upset about the damn streets and more, demanding state government

restore cuts to something called the Local Government Fund – in Toledo's case, approaching \$20 million annually!



I'm not sure that concept ever quite sunk in with the other mayoral candidates and reporters. ("Do you mean you'd hire a lobbyist? An attorney?") But it resonated with citizens. The "damn streets" became not only a reason for outrage and endless front-end alignments, but an issue we could do something about if we worked with other aggrieved Ohio urban dwellers.

From there it was a short hop to, "And if you want to know where the REAL money is, check this out: taxpayers in Toledo will send \$190 million to the Pentagon this year – \$35 million more than we raise with the municipal income tax to run our own city!"

At first, if reporters wrote about

that angle, they left out the dollar amount. One said his editor couldn't believe it. After reminding them about something called the internet, the number started to appear. I will admit I didn't bang that comparison home as often as I did the state funding issue. This is, after all, Toledo, Ohio not Humboldt County, California.

On the issue every Toledo candidate is compelled to address: jobs, I left other candidates to excoriate "the city's red tape" and went directly into worker-owned cooperatives, citing successful examples<sup>2</sup> in that socialist bastion of Cleveland – not Humboldt County either, but much closer.

I also called for serious examination, like 20 other cities are doing, of a public bank based on the one North Dakota has had for almost 100 years. Given the limited time available in "debates" among six (seven, if you count "The Prophetess" whom God told to save Toledo and who literally spoke in tongues<sup>3</sup>) candidates, the Public Bank of Toledo didn't get the airing it deserved, but people still came up to me on the street to say they thought it was a good idea.

And when you live in the city which a year ago had to literally tell people, "DO NOT DRINK,

COOK OR WASH WITH THE WATER,” saving Lake Erie (again) – this time from toxic algae blooms – should be automatically on the agenda.

Well, it was, sort of, if you count mindlessly extolling the virtues of “that wonderful jewel” and opining about the importance of water. So we used the mayor’s race to make the point environmentalists had tried for years to get on the radar: scores of toxic cesspools from corporate animal megafarms litter the Maumee River watershed and drain into Lake Erie, home to Toledo’s (and Cleveland’s and a couple million other people’s) water intakes.

These local megafarms produce two to three times more animal waste than the sewage output of Chicago and Los Angeles combined. It is then applied, untreated, to farm fields in the watershed -- and we wonder why we have toxic algae fed by an overabundance of phosphorus.

That was about as detailed as time allowed, but two mid-range opportunities opened up as a result of the campaign:

1) Toledo’s mayor and city council inexplicably refuse to tell the EPA to take official action, as it did in the case of Chesapeake Bay, and declare the lake an “impaired watershed” so polluters can be held legally accountable. People are beginning to flog that omission on a daily basis.

2) Ohio’s presidential primary election is coming in March and with it, Toledo’s vote on the Move to Amend resolution. When private money is buying every other election we will have plenty of room to talk about “money not

equaling speech,” how the Ohio Farm Bureau invests in legislative races, and how corporate constitutional rights allow the siting of megafarms that poison our drinking water.

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In short, in 10 weeks we raised about \$30,000 for a solid guerilla campaign. Mailings to strategically-targeted voters and a feisty TV spot<sup>4</sup> were supplemented with human billboards and “earned media.” These measures had an effectiveness equal to publishing 25 op-eds, putting ideas on the table no other candidate could or would. We built a large and engaged community of supporters on social media that remains for the battles ahead.

Here are the final words of my concession statement and quite possibly my favorite of the whole campaign:

*“Toledo needs leaders with the courage to stand up to powerful interests and fight for what’s right. That’s why I ran for mayor. But we can all be those leaders. We are literally the people we’ve been waiting for and there’s no limit to what we can accomplish with the power of democracy behind us. We can have a hand in our own destiny if we so choose.”*

And we had a damn good time!

## Notes

<sup>1</sup>Ferner promotes plan to fix Toledo streets  
<http://www.toledoblade.com/Politics/2015/09/17/Ferner-promotes-plan-to-fix-Toledo-streets.html>

<sup>2</sup> The Cleveland Model  
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Zl>

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<sup>3</sup>Mayoral Candidate Speaking In Tongues

[http://wn.com/mayoral\\_candidate\\_speaking\\_in\\_tongues](http://wn.com/mayoral_candidate_speaking_in_tongues)

<sup>4</sup> Hungry Piglets

[https://youtu.be/92\\_zVBTljI](https://youtu.be/92_zVBTljI)

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