

LWV – Legislative Interview with Assemblymember Al Muratsuchi, 66th Assembly District

The interviewers were:

Athena Paquette, President of the Torrance Area League of Women Voters
Barbara Inatsugu, President of the Santa Monica League of Women Voters
Karen McLaurin Buresh, Action Chair, League of Women Voters of Palos Verdes
Joan Arias, Secretary, League of Women Voters of the Beach Cities

After introductions by Athena Paquette, we asked the questions and heard responses as follows:

- 1. Funding of Elections:** *State and local governments have a fundamental obligation to provide an election process that ensures the integrity, accessibility, and security of our right to vote. However, the current approach to funding elections in California has many flaws. What legislative measures would you support to ensure adequate and stable funding of election administration in California?*

Assemblymember Muratsuchi: First of all, as a former League of Women Voters Board Member, I fully support Campaign Finance Reform. At the last forum, I shared my memories of being at the receiving end of billionaires attacking me and spending a great deal of money against me. One billionaire not in our District spent \$2 million to attack me in the last race. A second billionaire in the District spent one-half million dollars. It is wrong when billionaires can buy elections. This all starts at the top with Citizens United. We need to overturn Citizens United. We can't have special interests buy elections. We need more transparency for campaign funding.

I support the California Disclose Act to make sources of campaign funding more transparent so the public can hold election officials accountable."

When asked what kind of transparency he meant, Mr. Muratsuchi responded: "We need to require disclosure of the top three donors to initiatives. We have shadow entities with deceptive names. I speak from personal experience. The multi-million dollar campaign PAC against me (financed by Mr. Charles Munger) was called "The Spirit of Democracy California." Who can be against that!? We need more up-front transparency to find out who and what is behind campaigns. Voters deserve more information on who is funding a campaign." When we mentioned MapLight, Mr. Muratsuchi acknowledged that not everyone was so diligent in research as League members!

When asked about public funding, Mr. Muratsuchi affirmed "I am behind the principle of public funding. All candidates should have adequate funding so they don't have to rely on private funds to get their message out to the voters. But I

recognize that it is an uphill battle. It is unpopular with voters to spend public money to support political candidates, to use tax dollars to support politicians and their campaigns. Even though small jurisdictions provide varying degrees of public financing, when you are up against private deep pockets, it is a challenge. Deep pockets far eclipse public financing money. Now, money is hard to trace. There is no limit on how much special interests can give and how much officials can spend. This all goes back to Citizens United and the definition of money as free speech. There is no limit because it is treated as a First Amendment right; limits on campaign donations and on campaign spending are limits on First Amendment rights under Citizens United. But First Amendment rights are not unlimited rights. Compelling State interests allow regulation and limitation of First Amendment rights. We need to regulate the corrupting influence of money in politics.” Mr. Muratsuchi repeated “I want to overturn Citizens United.”

- 2. Public Higher Education:** *To increase access for students, the legislature has asked public higher education institutions to increase enrollment of Californians, and to ensure that students with greater needs are also accommodated. Yet despite increased funding from the legislature in recent sessions, per-student funding is currently less than before the Recession, and costs have risen.*

How can California meet the challenge of enrolling more students, including students with greater needs, at the UC and CSU? Is more state funding needed? Where does this issue rank in your legislative priorities?

Mr. Muratsuchi responded that “public higher education has always been one of my top priorities. I am the beneficiary of public education (CAL and UCLA). One of our greatest assets and a source of pride for California is our public higher education system. We have one of the best public education systems in the country and the world and yet underfunding continues to be a problem. Public higher education is chronically underfunded, especially the UC System. That is why we are admitting more out-of-state residents – to balance the budget. I met with Janet Napolitano in my first term and fought for more funding in exchange for more California students. I will continue to fight for that principle. But it is an ongoing budgetary challenge.

I just met with the UCLA Chancellor Gene Block and asked why costs had gotten so high – current students face \$50K/year for tuition, room and board at UCLA. A 4-year education comes to about \$125,000. The Chancellor explained that rising costs were due to the higher costs of running a world-class university. First, to be competitive, UCs must keep up with salaries at Ivy League Universities, private universities like Stanford. . Block also highlighted that UC systems provide a lot more services than before than many students may not have graduated because of health and counseling issues of one sort or another. This is true of educational institutions generally. We are providing much more counseling and health care (especially mental health) than ever before. We are seeing an alarming increase in the number of students with mental health issues”

When asked about the role of Community Colleges, Mr. Muratsuchi acknowledged that the Community Colleges are a pathway for students who could not afford a four-year university education. Community Colleges are very generous with assistance. More than 40% of Community College students don't pay. "We give a tremendous amount of financial aid. But many middle class and even upper middle class students don't qualify for aid because the aid is focused on students from the lower economic classes. Our Assembly district demographics include many middle class (from \$80,000-120,000 household income) people who are challenged by the cost of higher education."

When asked if this was related to the Legislature, Mr. Muratsuchi noted that these are budget issues. The governor's January budget does provide for continued increases for UC and CSU schools but it is still not enough to reduce costs. The Governor is pushing online educational opportunities and other lower cost options to reduce educational costs.

Barbara Inatsugu pointed out that our League Higher Education policy positions are relatively new and as a result of our study and positions, we can advocate on Higher Education issues.

- 3. Water Resources:** *The recent multi-year drought has made many Californians aware of the need to rethink the way they use water. California's economic activities, institutions, and infrastructure are based on water management models that were developed in the unusually wet 20th century. A report published in August 2014 by UC Davis researchers found that California has issued water rights for at least five times more surface water than the state receives on average from precipitation, even in a non-drought year.*

What kinds of legislative proposals would you support to ensure that enough water adequate quality is available for municipal and industrial uses, agriculture and the environment in the face of over-stretched surface water and groundwater resources and climate conditions different than those California experienced in the last century?

"Even with the wet season we currently have (the governor declared the drought "over" in 60% of the State), controls are still in place and we are still in a desert! We need to adopt and maintain sustainable water practices. We waste too much water especially with the reality of climate change. There are many efforts to adopt a water infrastructure that supports efforts to capture and recycle storm water runoff. We need to upgrade our water infrastructure to address the 'elephant in the room' – water rights! 80% of our water goes to agriculture. There is no incentive for farmers to go away from water intensive (such as almond tree farming) crops. It takes 1 gallon of water to grow 1 almond, but almonds are a very lucrative crop for the farmers. The groundwater pumping is so extensive in the Central Valley that the ground is sinking We have people talking about

building more dams but we can't continue to subsidize unsustainable water practices. Residents can only do so much. We need a balance.

As for the local water issues such as the Gardena area 'brown water' (resulting from aging pipes), many of these issues are being addressed. I will continue to make sure everyone receives clean and safe water." Mr. Muratsuchi is on both the Utilities and Energy and the Natural Resources committees.

When asked about the refinery issue as part of the local issue question, Mr. Muratsuchi noted that "this is one of my top priorities. When the Torrance Refinery exploded on February 18, 2015, we lived very close and there was white dust all over. Next Saturday (February 18, 2017) there will be a march and a rally at which I will speak. We deserve a safer Torrance Refinery. The Torrance Refinery is one of only 2 refineries of 50 in California that uses highly toxic hydrofluoric acid (the other refinery is in Wilmington)." The results of any serious accident or leakage would be catastrophic because of the toxic nature of this acid. "One of my top priorities is to eliminate hydrofluoric acid and install air quality monitors around the perimeter of the Refinery." Mr. Muratsuchi pointed to a group called FLARE Families Lobbying Against Refinery Exposures (FLARE), founded by mothers who want to know what their children breathe! "We deserve to know what goes on when there is flaring. We need a community advisory group to make people aware of the dangers of this acid."

He also pointed out that it is necessary to remember that the Refinery is a major part of the Southern California economy and there are concerns not only about safety but about job loss and economic support. The Torrance Refinery employs about 600 people, and another 500 contractors and these are high paying jobs. The City of Torrance receives funds from the Refinery through the Utility Tax paid by the Refinery. He is currently drafting bills to work toward eliminating the use of hydrofluoric acid in our refineries, and to install air quality monitors to provide information in real time. While there are alternatives to hydrofluoric acid (sulfuric acid is one of the alternatives used by 48 of the 50 refineries), the cost of transition is a concern. AQMD estimates the cost of transition is approximately \$1 million. The Refinery owners estimate the cost to be more like \$300-\$500 million. We need to support community efforts. The Air Quality Management District is looking at banning hydrofluoric acid. At one time in the early 90's Torrance sued Exxon Mobil to ban the use of hydrofluoric Acid and ended up settling but even with a modified acid, the city is still concerned. The Refinery is stepping up efforts to work with the community but they still oppose the elimination based on transition costs. Now, PBF Energy owns the refinery. The new owners are stepping up efforts to work with the community but still clearly oppose efforts to ban the use of hydrofluoric acid.

When asked about his major priorities for 2017, Mr. Muratsuchi enumerated:

- Education will always be one of my top priorities although I was not able to get on that committee.
- Jobs – the general issue of jobs – the South Bay was built on aerospace and I champion aerospace. I submitted a request to chair the Assembly Select Aerospace Committee to work on attracting and retaining aerospace jobs. I authored and co-authored 2 bills:
 - Space X – provided more than 4000 good-paying jobs in private space exploration.
 - Northrup-Grumman contract to bring many jobs here – one of the biggest private sector employers in the area.

This ties into the importance of quality higher public education. Mr. Muratsuchi quoted the Virgin-Galactic president as saying that California has the best workforce in the country. The Aerospace companies are working with higher education institutions to educate the workforce. Northrup-Grumman has an apprenticeship program at El Camino College. Boeing has a huge program at Cal State Long Beach. There is a fundamental link between jobs and education, going down to the high schools and career technical education. The SCROC program is a great one. These programs are important for both our kids and our industries.