LEGISLATOR

Assemblyman Jared Huffman repres

Including Marin and Southern Sonoma Counties

By Tim Linden

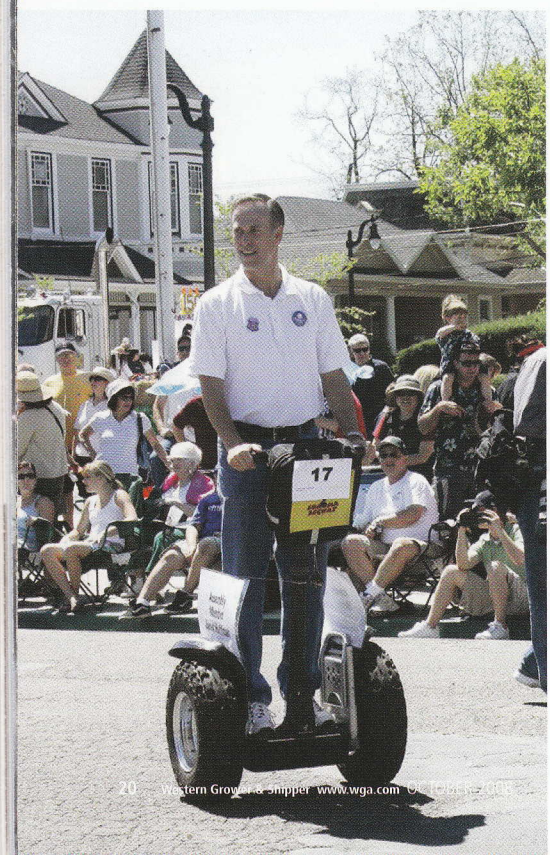
(Both the questions and answers have been edited and paraphrased)

WHERE DID YOU GROW UP AND GO TO SCHOOL?

I was born in Missouri and grew up in Independence, which is where I went to school. I went to college at UC Santa Barbara, which was my ticket west.

WHEN DID YOU FIRST GET INTERESTED IN POLITICS? DID A SPECIFIC ISSUE LEAD TO YOUR POLITICAL INVOLVEMENT?

I majored in political science at UC Santa Barbara, but I didn't have expectations that that would lead to elected office. I thought it gave me a number of options, including going to law school, which I eventually did. After graduation from law school I immediately joined a large San Francisco law firm and got involved in some major corporate litigation. That law firm however, did lots of pro bono work which allowed me to get involved in a major landlord tenant case. I also worked on a case against a major university which had cut female athletic programs to fund its football program. That got me involved in some civil rights cases and then I formed my own public interest law firm working on these same kind of cases.



YOU EVENTUALLY ENDED UP AS AN ATTORNEY FOR THE NATURAL RESOURCE DEFENSE COUNCIL, A MAJOR ENVIRONMENTAL GROUP. HOW DID THAT HAPPEN AND WHEN DID YOU GET INVOLVED IN LOCAL POLITICS?

I really got involved in the water issue after reading "Cadillac Desert," which is a very important book about water policy in this country. I first ran for public office as a member of the Marin Municipal Water District in 1994. That association led to increased involvement in the water issue and eventually led to the opportunity with the Natural Resources Defense Council, where I worked on the restoration of the San Joaquin River. At the end of my second six-year term at the Water District, my assemblyman, Joe Nation, had termed out and I decided to run for his office. There were six candidates and by no means was I the favorite.

WHAT PROPELLED YOU TO VICTORY?

The environment was my major issue and I was fortunate to be running at a time when environmental issues were top of mind. It was about that time that Al Gore's "An Inconvenient Truth" was playing and so we camped outside the theater and introduced ourselves to many voters. I think standing outside that movie and introducing myself to voters helped us get hundreds, if not thousands of votes.

IS THE ENVIRONMENT YOUR TOP ISSUE?

That is a very important issue to me but I don't want people to think it is my only issue. I care deeply about many other issues. I think our health care system is broken and needs to be fixed. I am also very interested in a broad range of issues including energy policy, water policy and sustainability.

WHAT IS YOUR TAKE ON CALIFORNIA'S WATER NEEDS?

I think we missed an important opportunity to get a water bond on the November ballot with the passing of that deadline. We really do need to solve this issue. I do not know if I see a solution on the horizon or if it is a mirage. More and more people seem to be focused on this issue with the understanding that we have to get something done.

AS A FORMER MEMBER OF THE NRDC, FRANKLY SOME AGRICULTURAL GROUPS HAVE BEEN SURPRISED THAT THEY HAVE BEEN ABLE TO WORK WITH YOU. IS THAT SURPRISING TO YOU?

I think it also sometimes surprises environmentalists that they can work with agriculture, but there are issues that they have in common. I try to approach the issues without too many preconceived views as to how other people think. My years as both an NRDC attorney and a member of the Marin Water District helped me do that. For a long time I lived somewhat a schizophrenic existence. By day I was an environmental advocate and at night I was part of the government that had to make decisions that influenced people's lives. I understand those two roles are different.

PROFILE

nts the 6th District

DO OTHERS IN THE LEGISLATURE GET THAT DISTINCTION? IS SACRAMENTO TOO POLARIZED?

I think Sacramento has lots of problems. And I don't mean just to cast aspersions across the aisle, but the Republican Caucus seems to have lost their interest in governing. There relevance is shrinking and they are losing their influence so I am afraid that they are becoming more interested in activism than solving problems. They seem to want to throw red meat to their base rather than govern. There are a lot of good people in the Republican Party and they have an important role to play and important ideas to share, but I am afraid they are in danger of becoming irrelevant if they don't try to work for compromise. Their position on the budget is a good example. They do not seem to want to reach a solution.

MANY PEOPLE BELIEVE IT IS THE DRAWING OF DISTRICT LINES THAT HAS CAUSED THIS POLARIZATION IN SACRAMENTO.

I agree and I do believe we need redistricting reform. I do not think legislators should be involved in drawing their own district lines. In fact, the only thing the matter with Prop 11 is that it allocates seats on the redistricting board on a 50/50 basis. I do not think that should be the case. I believe the positions should be apportioned in relationship to the party registration in the state. If a party continues to see its registration numbers decline and it drops to 10 percent of the registered voters in the state for example, I don't believe it should get 50 percent of the seats at the table. That is the only reason I am against Proposition 11.

WHAT DOES AGRICULTURE NEED TO DO TO INCREASE ITS INFLUENCE IN SACRAMENTO?

I do think agriculture is too aligned with the Republican Party, but I think agriculture does have lots of influence in Sacramento. Many committees have many agriculture votes. In fact, the majority of legislators do have rural constituencies. Your members may not know it but I have many agricultural constituents and we are very proud of them.

IS AGRICULTURE IMPORTANT TO CALIFORNIA?

Agriculture is very important to California and it has a very important role to play. In the environmental issues agriculture can be a big part of the solution because it is a great answer to stopping urban sprawl. We do have to look at the kind of agriculture that we can support. I do think we have to grow more food and less fuel as we have seen what happens when we go down that road. Agriculture also has to work toward incorporating more sustainable practices.

ARE YOU IN FAVOR OF TERM LIMITS?

I think term limits are a terrible failure. No one wants to take on the long term issues because they need to look at issues that can be solved quickly. You look at some of the more major pieces of legislation in California over the years and many took years to pass. With term limits we are also losing the institutional knowledge on staff because Sacramento has become a chaotic place. Water is just one example. There is no question that it is hard to find institutional knowledge about water. Given the importance of water to the state, you'd expect to find more experience and expertise in Sacramento but it is not there. The good folks are hard to find and those that do have that knowledge are a hot commodity.

OUR MEMBERS GROW THE FINEST FRESH FRUITS, VEGETABLES AND NUTS IN THE WORLD, AND WE HAVE A NATIONAL POLICY ADVISING CONSUMERS TO EAT 5-13 SERVINGS A DAY. DO YOU GET IN YOUR FIVE A DAY OR MORE? AND DO YOU HAVE A FAVORITE PRODUCE ITEM OR A FAVORITE WAY TO PREPARE A FRUIT, VEGETABLE AND/OR NUT?

I do get in my fruit and vegetable consumption on a daily basis. I especially like using our local farmers market and I am excited about local food. On a daily basis I get lots of vegetables for my salads from Star Route Farms and my tomatoes from my local organic farmer Jackie Brown. I am also a consumer of local wine especially my own homemade wine. I have 16 vines in my front yard that produce about 80 to 100 pound of grapes, which I augment with some grapes from local producers. This is my sixth year making my own wine. In fact I just finished bottling my last batch yesterday. In a very small way, my grape growing and wine making operation helps me appreciate the work that farmers do.