

Interview with James J. Florio (October 8, 2008)

Interview by Michael Aron

Edited by John Weingart

Michael Aron: It's the afternoon of October 8th, 2008. I'm Michael Aron of NJN News. This is the Rutgers Project on the Governor, the Brendan Byrne Archive. We're going to talk to Jim Florio this afternoon. Jim Florio was Congressman, elected to Congress when Brendan Byrne was first elected Governor. He served many years in the Congress, from Camden County. He ran for governor in 1977 and 1981, and was elected Governor in 1989, and served until '94.

Michael Aron: Governor, let's start with you. How did you first get into politics?

James J. Florio: That goes back awhile. As a student-- I was a student, a law student, in Camden-- I got involved with local politics as a local district leader as I was going to school. I was very much involved with the OEO, the Office of Economic Opportunity, which was the old War on Poverty. I read some of Obama's book, and I really could identify with his activities as a community organizer. Because that's what I did. I was elected neighborhood representative for something called a Community Action Plan, which was the organizing unit for the war on poverty in Camden. So I became very much involved there. And I just sort of glided from community activity into local politics; became the president of the Camden County Young Democrats. I finished law school, went to work in the City Attorney's Office in Camden, and then ultimately had an opportunity, not too distant after I passed the bar, to run for the State Legislature, in a year when nobody wanted to run because it was going to be a Republican year; and obviously I was a Democrat. And they were right. 1969 was a wipeout year for Democrats. Governor Cahill got elected with a big margin, and I think there were only really two Democrats south of Trenton-- myself and John Horn-- who got elected that year.

Q: Who were the key Camden Democratic politicians of that time?

James J. Florio: Well there was a Senator, Senator John Cowgill, who was sort of a county/state political leader. And then what you had was a fellow, Frank Maloney, who was the county chairman. You had some up and coming people who were just coming onto the fore, a fellow, Jim Joyce, who became the Democratic chairman, and Angelo Errichetti, who subsequently became the mayor and the state senator. They were kind of the who's who of political leaders at the time.

Q: Maloney; didn't you name a Maloney state chairman when you were Governor?

James J. Florio: No, no. This-- there was an Italian Maloney and an Irish Maloney. You're thinking about the Irish Maloney. This was an Italian-American Maloney.

Q: Okay. I thought maybe it was a son.

James J. Florio: No.

Q: Did you have a mentor?

James J. Florio: I had someone who helped me a lot to understand local politics. First and foremost was Mayor Al Pierce. When I first came to Camden I wrote him a letter saying that I was interested in becoming involved in politics-- I was like 23-years-old I think-- and he assigned a local district leader, Armand Paglione-- actually the local ward leader-- to come talk with me. And this is sort of a rough-edged guy but very street smart, and he took a liking to me. And so ultimately I became a district leader; there's the ward and then there's smaller districts, And at that point-- this was sort of the old-time political arrangements-- you'd have district leaders who were kind of the liaison between the political apparatus of the organization and the people. And I took things very seriously. So I went around knocking on doors in my district and my neighborhood, and I signed up about 600 registered voters, and I was sort of a little tiny power in a political organization.

Q: What was Camden like in those days? It has such a negative reputation today.

James J. Florio: Yes. Well that was at sort of the, almost at the end of the old Camden, the Camden of ethnic neighborhoods. There was a Polish section, there was an Italian section, there was a Jewish section, there was a Black section. But around the '70s seventies there was white flight and the city just turned into largely a black community, and it started to have difficult times. But at this point, in the '60s, it was just-- still people were working in production at Campbell Soup. RCA was another big employer. The shipyard was just getting ready to close, which was another big employer. So all the big employers sort of left, and that's when you had some deterioration.

Q: What was your first contact with a New Jersey governor?

James J. Florio: New Jersey governor?

Q: Yes.

James J. Florio: I went to a rally as a student for Governor Hughes; didn't get to meet him, but I was in the crowd as a kid.

Q: Would that be in Camden?

James J. Florio: That was-- he came to Camden, he came to Camden.

Q: Where did you go to college?

James J. Florio: I'm sorry?

Q: Where did you go to college?

James J. Florio: I went to college at Trenton State Teacher's College, which now is the College of New Jersey.

<Crew talk>

Q: The rally for Hughes, was that in Trenton or in Camden?

James J. Florio: No it was in Camden.

Q: In Camden.

James J. Florio: In Camden.

Q: Were you a married man by that point in time?

James J. Florio: I was, I was.

Q: Young family?

James J. Florio: Young family, yes, and married.

Q: So how about after Hughes, after the rally? Any contact with him subsequently, or with Cahill?

James J. Florio: No, no, no. Governor Cahill was the Congressman in our area. So I knew him a little bit; not really intimately, but I knew him. I suspect he probably didn't know me, but he became the governor. And that's when I ran, in 1969, with him on the ticket. And, of course, being a local Congressman, he ran up huge margins. I think I won in the district that I ran in by 360 votes out of whatever it was, 60,000, that were cast. So, as I say, only myself and my running mate, John Horn, got elected that year.

Q: What was your experience in the Assembly like?

James J. Florio: Well it was interesting. I took very seriously my responsibilities, as a young, very idealistic person. And in those days there really was no structure in the Assembly. You got elected; you got a desk and that was it. You had a committee structure that didn't function. You had no real professional staff of any great consequence. So you had to go and do your own research, if you were serious about your responsibilities; which I spent a lot of time in the library trying to do research to make sure I made good decisions.

Q: Any particular subject in your memory?

James J. Florio: Oh yes, I was very much involved in some of the environmental issues at the time. Also two real subjects that I was interested in was tenants' rights-- I had a lot of tenants in my district; helped a little bit in that area develop some of the laws. The labor relations areas-- PERC is the system that we have; I was very much involved in the early part of that. And then environmental matters. And this, as you may recall, was a time of the new sort of awakening of

environmental matters-- the end of the '60s, early part of the '70s-- when we all started to take seriously the responsibilities that we have to start dealing with the problems associated with industrialization as they impact upon air and water.

Q: Do you recall who were the leaders in Trenton at the time; the big Democratic leaders who you had to listen to and observe?

James J. Florio: Well there's Senator Musto, was a very big power at that point. David Friedland was somebody who was a person at that point. Bill Dickey was a Camden County Republican, who was Speaker of the Assembly. You had-- Supreme Court Justice Wilentz was an Assemblyman there. So you had some fairly impressive people. And it's a different era. You had sort of highs and lows. You had really talented people, and then you had some people, who go unnamed, who were less than talented.

Q: You spent four years, two terms, in the Assembly before you ran for Congress. Is that correct?

James J. Florio: Well I spent-- actually 1972 I ran for Congress, while I was in the Assembly, and lost. And then I ran again in 1974 and won. I got elected three times and served five years, because I left in the middle of the third term to go to Congress.

Q: And I misspoke when I said that you ran for Congress the year that Brendan Byrne ran for governor. You would have run for Congress a year later.

James J. Florio: A year later, that's right.

Q: In the federal cycle. Do you think that you were unusual in studying issues; that other people you served with might have found you bookish or strange or--

James J. Florio: Well I've always been regarded, for the good or for the bad, as somebody that's much more comfortable with the substance than the overt politics of things. But there were; there were some people who were very smart, very, very good. Alan Karcher was up there; obviously a very substantive person at that point. So not unusual totally, but part of a smaller group than the vast majority I suspect.

Q: Alan Karcher, who would run against you in the Democratic primary...

James J. Florio: Yes.

Q: ...many years later...

James J. Florio: Yes, yes.

Q: ...and hold up a box of cereal called Florios.

James J. Florio: And one of the things I treasure is a letter that I received from Alan, after I got elected, saying, "I apologize. I said you were mushy"-- whatever the heck he described me as; and then after I did some of the things we did, he said, "You are really a standup guy." That was a nice thing.

Q: What's your first memory of Brendan Byrne?

James J. Florio: Vivid, it's a vivid recollection. We were reading in the newspapers that one group of leaders or bosses, as the case may be, didn't like the selection of another group of bosses for the candidacy-- 1973 I guess it was-- and therefore they had found this judge who was really a very clean person, was very good. And when he got announced the county chairman called all the political people together and said, "We're going to meet this fellow. He's coming down from Essex County next Saturday morning at the Silver Lake Inn, in Clementon." And so we had a couple of hundred people ready to meet the anointed one. And Brendan came down-- and this goes to the point of Brendan being converted from a caterpillar to a butterfly over the years; he was in his caterpillar stage at this point. He had a seersucker blue and white suit, red argyle socks-- and this is vivid, I remember it-- and white bucks. He came and they gave him a microphone. The county chairman, I think it was Jim Joyce at the time, introduced him as "our guy, our candidate." And through the course of the whole presentation Brendan looked at his shoes for the most part, didn't project to the audience very well, and mumbled a lot. So it was just a startling thing. So all of us are saying, "Who is this guy? Where did he come from?" And the only thing we knew was that he was being supported by "our team", and that he was squeaky clean. And there were some insinuations that the other fellow was not totally squeaky clean. Obviously he got elected. We worked very hard for him. But it was not-- it was sort of an underwhelming introduction to Governor Byrne.

Q: And you say you worked very hard. Do you recall whether it was a tough election or an easy election for Byrne?

James J. Florio: No I think it turned out to be an easier election than people had thought. You may recall Congressman Sandman was the opponent, and he was in the process of self-destructing in Washington with the whole Watergate thing. He was perceived of as entirely too conservative for New Jersey people. And he had beaten Governor Cahill in the primary. So you had a whole bunch of Republican-oriented people who were Cahill people, who I suspect either sat on their hands or, in fact, voted for Governor Byrne.

Q: Governor Byrne's first term was dominated by the fight for an income tax.

James J. Florio: Uh-hum.

Q: What's your recollection of that? And where are you?

James J. Florio: Yes my recollection is-- again another vivid one. Governor Byrne had a person who's become a very dear friend of mine now, who in those years I

hated because he was a hatchet man, Dick Leone. Dick Leone was someone who was very aggressive on behalf of the governor's policies, and didn't have, at that point, the smoothest manner in terms of interacting with people that were not at the level that were interacting with the front office. I was a junior member of the Legislature, and therefore his conversations with me were not so much discussions as telling me what I should be doing if I was smart. I thought of myself as smart and therefore didn't need to be told what I should be doing. And so the chemistry was not always as good as it could be. As I say, I'm really pleased that over the years we've developed a very good friendship. But Dick Leone was the liaison with me in the Governor's Office, on those types of tough issues.

Q: Was he the governor's right-hand man, in your view?

James J. Florio: As far as I was concerned, as far as the Legislature was concerned-- Lew Kaden was another person who was a key person in the Governor's Office; but we dealt more with Dick Leone.

Q: Did you deal with the governor?

James J. Florio: Not that much, not that much. The governor wasn't-- actually I interacted-- and I was only there for a year with Governor Byrne; so that's understandable. But Governor Cahill, I interacted with him more over the period of time I was there than I did with Governor Byrne.

Q: Why? Because you're from the same part of the state or...

James J. Florio: No, I think it was--

Q: ...a difference in style?

James J. Florio: It was just that Governor Byrne was there for a very short period of time, was working hard to formulate his policies, had some difficult things, and wasn't doing as much outreach to the legislators, at that point. I assume that probably changed over the years after I left the Congress, but at that point there wasn't as much direct outreach.

Q: You paint a picture of Leone as kind of an abrasive personality at that time. How much difficulty might there have been between the executive branch, the Governor's Office and the Legislature, in that first year?

James J. Florio: No, there wasn't difficulty. There always is difficulty, particularly when people, new people come in, and you have legislators, many of whom have been there for a very long period of time. There's always that period of time when you have to come to adjustment. It's the same thing with a new president and a Congress. So that's not to be unexpected. And I'm assuming after I left the relationships probably got much more readily facilitating in terms of getting things done.

Q: What kind of a relationship does a freshman Congressman have with a governor of his state?

James J. Florio: Well a much better one actually. I interacted on a couple of occasions, not so much with the governor as with the governor's staff people, and the governor's cabinet people. I had a good relationship with a number of those people because they were calling on me, as a congressman, to be able to work hard. There was a fellow, Commissioner Bardin, who was at DEP, who I worked with very closely on a number of issues, because I was involved at the Washington level in environmental matters. So we interacted quite extensively.

Q: Do you recall if there was a Washington office of the Governor of New Jersey in those days?

James J. Florio: Yes there was. I'm trying to think of that-- Marsha Thompson, I think her name was.

Don Linky: Marilyn.

James J. Florio: Marilyn, that's right, Marilyn Thompson was the person. And the governor had a fairly aggressive office down there; not so much in terms of volume of people, but people who were very, very good, people who really mastered the subject matter, knew the interests of New Jersey, and were able to convey them to the members of Congress. So it was a very good working relationship.

Q: Let's talk about the income tax fight in the state. It took three years, or thereabouts, for Byrne to get the income tax that he wanted, once he was in office. Were you involved in that fight? Were you for or against--

James J. Florio: Well I was gone by the time that the final version passed. But he was floating versions around earlier on. And I had some difficulties with some of the things that were talked about at the early years, particularly the homestead provisions. I represented the City of Camden; obviously, even at that point, was a fairly depressed area, and I was looking for more benefits to come with this whole package for working class, poor people. But ultimately, after I left and went to Congress, the bill was modified and was ultimately passed.

Q: You're talking about the homestead rebate that was instituted...

James J. Florio: That's right.

Q: ...with the income tax.

James J. Florio: Yes.

Q: And you're saying that didn't appeal to you because your constituency was fewer homeowners?

James J. Florio: Well there were fewer people paying taxes. So I wanted to have more benefits come from this system to go to low-income people, working class people. I also had some questions-- and this was probably after I left-- about school funding formulas and things of that sort; which are all tied in together.

Q: Do you recall whether, when it finally was in its final throes of being passed and the Supreme Court got involved, whether you were onboard with it or still raising concerns about it?

James J. Florio: No actually the school funding portion was the part that was really driving me. Income tax obviously provides the revenues. I just wanted to make sure the revenues were going to the school district-- the so-called Abbott districts now-- because the City of Camden had some fairly serious problems, which even to this day they still have in funding quality education for all the children.

Q: The people who worked the closest with Brendan Byrne to get that income tax passed regard it as a kind of heroic effort. How do you regard it? Do you see it that way, or as something that was simply inevitable? Or neither?

James J. Florio: Yes. Revenues are necessary. Obviously the big ideological fight is whether you raise more revenues. And it goes to the question of what you expect out of government. If you don't expect a whole lot out of government, you don't need a lot of revenues. On the other hand if you expect government to do certain things, that no one else is going to do-- we talk a lot about privatizing. There are some functions that you're not going to privatize because there's no money to be made; so the private sector would not be involved with that. Quality education is something that you really have to have government presence in. And public health, another area you have to have a public sector presence in, and if you have the presence you need the revenues. So I almost regarded that as inevitable that you're going to have a revenue base that is hopefully equitable, and if it's going to be equitable, you're going to have to have a graduated progressive tax system; an income tax system as an aspect of that.

Q: Do you remember any aspect of the tax fight when you were still in the Assembly in 1974? Remember how it went?

James J. Florio: Well not really, because I was really very much, all through 1974, involved in the campaign that I ran in 1974.

Q: At some point you started looking at running for governor in 1977, which you ultimately would do.

James J. Florio: Right.

Q: When did that thought first start to form?

James J. Florio: Well it was interesting because-- and this is a whole interesting story about the cleverness of Brendan Byrne-- that, as you may recall, there was

speculation that the governor would not run for a second term, because by virtue of the income tax passing and all the commotion over that, the governor's popularity ratings went down dramatically. And there was serious speculation-- and I think he even fostered some of it-- that he would not run, to the point where even some of the members of his own cabinet announced that they were running for his position. And there was a big field; I forget, six, seven, eight people who were running. I went to the Governor and had a conversation with him and said, "Governor, if you're running, I'm not even going to consider it, and I will support you. But if you're not going to run, if you let me know, I'll be happy to-- I'm thinking about running. Most of these other candidates are from North Jersey. I'm from South Jersey. I think that would give me a sufficient base." I was the only Congressman with a fairly good sized base to run from. And he said, "Well I'm going to give it some thought. I'm not sure what I'm going to do." And as the deadline kept getting closer and closer-- and I had people that were getting more and more enthusiastic about me running. We got right up to the end of the deadline and the governor still didn't give me an answer. I presumed that meant he was not going to run, or that I should take his non-response as-- he didn't ask me not to run, so I ran. And then of course the governor ran, and won with a small plurality in this field of seven or eight people. I later found out in later years that-- again Dick Leone was one of the people that shared this with me-- well the goal was to get me into the race. Because you'd have that many more people in, you'd narrow the field, and you wouldn't have to have as big a margin to prevail. So that was very clever. I admire it now; I'm not sure I admired it at the time. Because I really didn't have a sense of how to win a primary election in the state. I was just out there on a lark, with a group of very dedicated, but small, group of people who were from my area, who were traveling with me around the state trying to make a dent. And I forget, I think I finished fourth or fifth or sixth or whatever.

Q: Do you recall if you took a poll before deciding whether to make that run or not?

James J. Florio: I think we did, if I recall, and I think it showed generically nobody else was that significant. In terms of the other people who were running, nobody had greater name recognition or-- well a little bit of name recognition but no real base of support. I had a good base of support.

Q: But Brendan Byrne had name recognition.

James J. Florio: Of course. As the governor, clearly he has name recognition.

Q: You talked about the commotion that accompanied the passage of the income tax-- and that was your word 'commotion'-- and I can't help but think of the commotion that I saw more directly when you passed a couple of tax increases in the early '90s. How did that commotion compare to the commotion that accompanied your tax hikes?

James J. Florio: They were comparable; comparable in terms of the intensity, comparable in terms of being driven by groups that may not be reflective of the

whole state. I think the only difference, of course, there was a bigger media megaphone when I was in office than there was with Brendan. Most of the commotion when Brendan was in office was newspaper driven commotion, in the sense it was radiated out to the general population. With me it was largely radio driven, with the local radio station.

Q: Were you surprised that Brendan Byrne won the primary?

James J. Florio: Well no, not after I saw the numbers of people who were there. Again, I can't remember what the numbers were, but they were not particularly impressive numbers. It was clear that if it'd been a one-on-one, or even maybe three-on-one candidacy, the governor might not have prevailed.

Q: You didn't realize at the time that you were being actively encouraged to run by the governor's own people?

James J. Florio: No; no I did not. Yes, sure. Life is about learning.

Q: What were you focusing on in Congress in those years, in the mid-'70s, mid- to late-'70s?

James J. Florio: Well I was very much involved on my committee assignment, and that's very-- in Congress life is your committee assignment; that's where you really have an impact. And my committee was the Energy and Commerce Committee, which is one of the really priority committees. We have healthcare, telecommunications, energy, railroads, environmental legislation within that committee. And I became the sub-committee chairman very early on. We changed the rules. You may recall the Watergate class was a big class of reformers. And one of the things when we went in was to go in and get rid of the seniority system, whereby the only way you became chairman of a committee was to wait around for 20 years. We got rid of that and had elections for chairmen. So after I was there just a couple of years, I ran for election to be elected as the chairman of my subcommittee. And I had I think distinguished myself among my colleagues, knowing a bit about the environmental matters, which were the high visibility issues in our committee, and I was elected. So in a very short period of time, about three years or so, I was the chairman of the subcommittee. And the subcommittee had varied jurisdiction. We had jurisdiction over railroad matters; transportation matters particularly. We had environmental jurisdiction. The Federal Trade Commission, which was all about consumer protection and things like that. So we had interesting jurisdiction. And we had in our title the word 'commerce'; commerce, transportation and tourism. And Washington, the secret in Washington, is being able to get that parliamentarian to agree that your committee has sufficient jurisdiction, so it'll have bills referred to it. Well as you can appreciate, commerce is fairly expansive. We got legislation referred to us to regulate boxing, because it was in interstate commerce. So I was sort of entrepreneurial in getting good areas that we could get our teeth into, and those are the areas that I spent a lot of time with. And in the first couple of years, with the Ford administration, it was a good time for me to be learning, so that when the Carter people came in, it really had me prepared to go

utilize the availability of the resources of the White House to get a lot of things done that were fairly important.

Q: You mentioned boxing. You were a boxer yourself, in the Navy I believe.

James J. Florio: In the Navy, yes.

Q: In the Navy, not--

James J. Florio: A short, undistinguished career.

Q: A short undistinguished career?

James J. Florio: Yes.

Q: Okay. Did you do anything with boxing in your committee or--

James J. Florio: Yes we did. We had boxing legislation to try to have boxing retirement benefits for boxers; many of them, as you probably know, do not have benefits. We talked about having more national standards, rather than having state by state standards. And we had examples of where some states were sanctioning boxing matches with someone who had been knocked out six times in the last two months; clearly inappropriate, but there were no standards on a national basis. I tried to get that done.

Q: Did you and the Byrne administration interact on any big matters?

James J. Florio: In Washington?

Q: Yes.

James J. Florio: Yes, on a lot of the matters that the state was interested in. On the transportation side. Amtrak was part of my jurisdiction in the committee, and we've always, the transportation commissioners, the various commissioners, have always been interested in trying to maximize the value of Amtrak for New Jersey people. They used to call them the clockers, which are the commuters who would get discount tickets, who would come and stay in New Jersey and travel on Amtrak. And then Amtrak, of course, worked with Transit New Jersey. So there was constant communication between the Transportation Department in Trenton, my office, and the Transportation Department in Washington.

Q: Was Lou Gambaccini the transportation commissioner in those days?

James J. Florio: He was before me. But I still-- I knew--

Q: He was before you. Alan Sagner was the--

James J. Florio: Alan Sagner was there, and some other folks came later on as well.

Q: How about the Pinelands? Did you interact with Brendan Byrne on the Pinelands?

James J. Florio: Very much so, very much so. As a matter of fact I brought the idea-- I was on the Interior Committee; as well as my major committee assignment, my minor committee assignment was the Interior Committee. The Interior Committee is generally populated by people from the West. People in the East aren't interested in national parks that much; whatever. But I got on the committee because I was very interested in having some designation by the Interior Department of special status for the Pinelands in New Jersey. And I did that for a number of reasons, not the least of which is I'm from South Jersey, so I know the fragility of that whole area. Sitting on top of the largest freshwater aquifer on the East Coast that supplies drinking water for people; over-development would desecrate that whole water source. But more importantly, and somewhat relevant to these times, there were serious proposals to drill for oil off the coast of New Jersey; very serious. Atlantic City was talking about helicopter ports to ferry people out to the oilrigs. And at that point I had an understanding, and other people as well, that if offshore drilling took place-- all of our refineries are on the Delaware River. To get the oil from the derricks to the refineries would mean pipelines through New Jersey, right through the Pinelands. If in fact we had an oil spill in the Pinelands, you would just stop drinking water capability for most of the people of South Jersey. So that was the major motivation for me introducing legislation to isolate the Pinelands-- which is one-fifth of New Jersey; it's a million acres-- as an area that should be regulated very, very closely, so as not to have inappropriate development take place that would jeopardize the integrity of that area.

Q: What came first, the state effort to preserve the Pinelands, or federal legislation?

James J. Florio: No, no, no. The federal effort authorized the state to take this. It is a federal preserve, which authorizes action by the state to be able to formulate a plan, formulate a commission. And so the legislation out of Washington is the authorizing legislation to allow New Jersey to do what it did.

Q: Were you the chief sponsor of that?

James J. Florio: I was the chief sponsor, yes.

Q: Are you then the father of the Pinelands?

James J. Florio: I am, I am. And actually it's been very nice over the years; folks who have followed these things have been very kind in saying, "Think about what would have happened to the Pinelands if we had never had the Pinelands Preservation Act." Think about what's happened to the rest of New Jersey in terms

of over-development. That is almost scary to think what might have happened to that whole pristine area, if we didn't have that federal and state regulatory system.

Q: You served as chairman of the Pinelands Commission recently.

James J. Florio: I did.

Q: In the McGreevey administration.

James J. Florio: Governor McGreevey contacted me and said, "The entity is in a little bit of a state of disarray." Over the years a lot of good things have happened but, for whatever reasons, there were some administrative difficulties there. And he asked me if I would be willing to go be the chairman, to sort of get it straightened out. I said, "I'm doing a whole bunch of things, but this is important, so I will sign on to a three-year commitment to do it." And he said, "Fine." So we did. They have a wonderful executive director down there, John Stokes, who I've worked with. I've worked with the board-- the commission rather-- and the place has been put back in order. And I left at the end of my three years.

Q: How difficult politically was it to get the Pinelands Preservation Act passed?

James J. Florio: It was very difficult. And frankly I suspect I probably paid a price for it. There were a lot of people in South Jersey, particularly real estate oriented people, who were extremely unhappy. And this was just before my run in 1981 for governor. And you may recall, or may not recall, that was something that was used as an argument as to why South Jersey should secede. There was all these sort of silly arguments about how the North Jersey people and the Philadelphia people were going to pipe our water out of the Pinelands. And, of course, it was nonsense, but it carried the day for some people, in their views.

Q: How about the residents and the municipal officials of Pinelands communities? Did they want preservation? Or did they want development, and see you as an interloper?

James J. Florio: It was a mixed bag. There were a whole lot of people-- there was a fellow- there was a mayor of Bass River who for perhaps all the wrong reasons didn't want development. Because I remember him saying, "I don't want those people from Camden coming down here. And so we want to preserve everything." Obviously we took his support to preserve it. We didn't think much of his motivation. But there were other people who were arguing the opposite, saying, "No, no, we want to be able to get ratables, and therefore if we have to chop down the forest, concrete over everything, that's the high priority." But the important thing is that over these 25 years or so, now there's absolutely no real dispute; that on balance this was the right thing to do for that part of the state.

Q: Is there too much development right around the Pinelands?

James J. Florio: Well that's a consideration, that's a consideration; because you can't isolate an area. But I think we're now becoming more sensitive to the fact of the problems associated with inappropriate development on the water supply. If you pump down the aquifer, you have salt water come in from the river side, as well as the ocean side, and you can jeopardize the integrity of the water system that is the drinking water system for people.

Q: You say that the Federal Act preceded the State Act.

James J. Florio: Uh-hum.

Q: What role, if any, did you play in pushing the State Act?

James J. Florio: Well I was very supportive. I worked with Joe Merlino, who was the prime sponsor.

Q: Was he the Senate president at the time?

James J. Florio: He was a senator. I think he was the Senate President at the time. But he was kind of the point man. And I had great admiration for him, because he took a lot of flak.

Q: From?

James J. Florio: From all the people who were opposed to preserving the Pinelands, and real estate developers, builders, construction people who saw this as jeopardizing their stockholdings.

Q: Don't those people generally get their way in state politics?

James J. Florio: Well in this instance-- and this is a commentary on Governor Byrne. I think maybe it's the most important commentary on Governor Byrne. Governor Byrne is a very easy-going man. He's funny, he's humorous, whatever. But there's a spine of steel when in fact he decides to dig his heels in. This is one of those things that he decided was a legacy issue, was important to do. And he took a lot of flak on this. And he and Joe Merlino were, if I recall correctly, kind of the key people out there making the policy argument that this was something that in the long-term was absolutely essential for the state to do. And I lent my voice, when it was helpful, in terms of trying to get public opinion to focus on the long-term, as opposed to the short-term; which, of course, is always the problem. Short-term things are in your face; long-term consequences, you have to be educated about them.

Q: A little bit before the Pinelands preservation came the Atlantic City gambling, the casino authorization. It's not your district, your congressional district, it's the neighboring district. Nonetheless it's an important part of the fabric of South Jersey.

James J. Florio: Yes.

Q: What was your view on gambling?

James J. Florio: Well interestingly enough I was at the 1964 Democratic Convention in Atlantic City, as a student. I went down there as the Chairman of the Young Democrats and played kind of an interesting role in the whole controversy about the seating of the Mississippi delegation; the Civil Rights issue. I was asked by some of the political leaders to round up young people to go sit in the seats, so that the segregationist delegation could not take their position. But I think the relevance of that event to casino gambling was that was really the bottom. Atlantic City was perceived of by all the people who were down there as a place of, "Why did they ever select Atlantic City to come?" The hotels were dilapidated. Water systems didn't work. And so I think someone after 1964 said, "We've got to really do something if this place is not going to continue to deteriorate." And I think that was kind of the genesis of thinking about things to rehabilitate the city, and the casino gambling initiative ultimately was approved by the people of the state. After an initial effort to have gambling all over the state failed, it was then focused on Atlantic City, and it was passed.

Q: Were you supportive of both efforts, or of the second effort?

James J. Florio: Yes I was supportive of both efforts. I thought that if you're going to be using revenue-- I didn't have a moralistic approach to gambling. I think gambling is a business. If it's run well it can be a good business. If it's not run well it can be a bad business. And we were pretty much committed to-- and Governor Byrne followed through on this-- having a very stringent, regulatory system that would make sure that you would keep bad elements out of the gambling industry.

Q: Steve Perskie played a role in...

James J. Florio: Yes.

Q: ...bringing gambling to Atlantic City. And he was in your administration, in the Governor's Office, many years later. You probably served in the legislature with him.

James J. Florio: We were. We were friends; have been friends for a very long period of time.

Q: What did he do in terms of bringing gambling to--

James J. Florio: Oh he was-- what Joe Merlino was to the Pinelands, Steve Perskie was to casino gambling; being the key spokesperson that had the answers. In the legislative process it is not sufficient to be able to go out and advocate. You have to be also the defensive guy, so that when you're advocating and people come up with all the answers as to why your initiative is not good, you have to be the guy who fields the responses. So you do the offense and you do the defense. Steve Perskie is that in spades. He is really very knowledgeable, very good, very articulate, and he was the person that carried the day.

Q: New Jersey Transit was created during this same era. And you said that you had some jurisdiction over transportation.

James J. Florio: Right.

Q: To what extent was that a significant legacy item; to use that term.

James J. Florio: Well it was a significant item, because it was inevitable; it's happened all over, as you may recall. The private sector was involved in transportation and came to the inevitable conclusion that you can't make money out of mass transit; you're not going to make a profit. Hence Amtrak was formed, New Jersey Transit was formed. And that lasted 'til this day. Nobody can really make-- the capital costs of providing mass transit are such that you can't charge enough out of the fare box to fully fund, and make a profit, mass transit. So it was just facing up to the reality that mass transit is something that is a public sector response, and we got to acknowledge that, accept it, and then try to get the maximum efficiency out of the dollars that we put into mass transit systems.

Q: Has it been a success?

James J. Florio: I think it has been, yes. I think New Jersey has a good system. We have had a series of good executive directors over the years, at the time when Brendan was in and straight on through. We've had, almost without exception, really superior people heading New Jersey Transit.

Q: Has Atlantic City worked out to gambling?

James J. Florio: I think Atlantic City has worked out. There's more to do. We're going through right now a period of re-doing the model. I suspect if we were sitting here five years from now, we won't recognize Atlantic City, because the model with not be day-trippers, the model will not be getting as much money out of slot machines, it will be to try to make it a destination so people will go, spend more money. All the casinos now are shooting for a model that will get more money out of their non-casino activities than out of the casino activities. And so they realize we're never going to be Las Vegas. But to the degree that the Borgata is an example of what you can see in the future in Atlantic City, that's the model we're going to have.

Q: You mentioned before we started the interview that you had some interaction with the Byrne administration over veterans' hospitals.

James J. Florio: Yes. Well it's kind of an interesting thing. When I was in the Congress, one of the initiatives during the Carter administration was to bring a veterans' hospital, a full-size, major veterans' hospital to Camden, New Jersey. It was something I was supporting; everyone else was supporting. But we needed the State support for it. And this is kind of a humorous story. We got a lot of state support. We went so far as to actually have the land for the VA hospital be condemned. People actually moved off the site. And in the course of getting State

support for this, we went up and met with Governor Byrne. And I say 'we' meaning a whole delegation of particularly labor leaders, building trades people; all very, very supportive, because obviously the jobs are there. And then we had some veterans come along as well. And I will never forget-- and the governor is disarming sometimes in terms of his ability to be focused, appear to be unfocused-- he was always focused, but sometimes he appears to be unfocused. And I can remember bringing all these big, gruff building trades guys into the front office to meet with the governor. And they had sort of a show and tell presentation of all the benefits that would come from the hospital, all the jobs that would be created, all the access for veterans that would be facilitated by having this hospital. And all through the presentation that each person was making, the governor appeared to be almost more engaged in filling his fountain pen. He had an old-fashioned fountain pen and an ink thing. And after the whole thing was over we went out into the hall, and I can't recount to you the obscenities that were conveyed by some of the folks. But I tried to assure them that "Yes, he was paying attention, he just-- this is the way the governor sometimes is involved with these types of issues, but rest assured he heard every word that you were saying." But it was something that took a little persuading and, as I say, I heard some words that day that I haven't heard since, because there was this sense of unhappiness in some circles.

Q: Now I don't know of any veterans' hospital in Camden.

James J. Florio: No. Incidentally the end of the story was that was during the Carter administration. President Reagan came in and one of the first things he did was-- on his first budget-- was to strike all the money. So we had-- now that whole area now is part of the Cooper Hospital complex that's down there now. But that was the site where we had-- literally people moved off the site; homes acquired for the hospital, and then just the rug pulled out when the new people came into office.

Q: Did Cooper Hospital exist back then?

James J. Florio: Yes, Cooper Hospital existed in a much more limited way. It's obviously expanded since that time. But it was going to be a facility that was going to be in conjunction with Cooper Hospital.

Q: After you lost to Governor Byrne in the primary in 1977, were you active in trying to get him re-elected?

James J. Florio: Oh yes; yes, very much so. I've always had good relationships with the governor. Again I was a little perplexed, as I mentioned to you earlier, as to why nobody told me to stay out of the race; but then I learned later. But no, I was very active in attempting to-- and it was an easy campaign, as you may recall. That was sort of the B-S campaign, as it was labeled.

Q: You're probably the twentieth or thirtieth person to talk about the B-S campaign. Everybody remembers that. Well wasn't Ray Bateman a significant figure in the state at the time?

James J. Florio: Yes he was. I think he was President of the Senate, or if not he was one of the leaders of the Senate. And a very nice man; a nice man. And that was one of the collegial contests we've had. Tom Kean and myself talk about the fact that we really had the last collegial campaign in 1981. But the 1977 campaign was likewise very collegial.

Q: But when you remember it, it all turned on that Bateman-Simon economic plan that was--

James J. Florio: Yes, but it was done-- it was not done in the way things are done now, just in terms of being very aggressive, being antagonistic and malicious. The comment was almost in a humorous fashion, identifying Mr. Simon with Mr. Bateman.

Q: Up until that point did it look like a tough race, or did it always look like a Democratic year?

James J. Florio: No, I think that was perceived of as a Democratic year. Later in the campaign it became more obvious that there was nothing that was going to happen good for the Republicans. The governor, I think, won by a reasonably good margin, if I recall.

Q: You said earlier that when you first met Brendan Byrne down there in the Silver--

James J. Florio: Silver Lake Inn.

Q: Silver Lake Inn.

James J. Florio: Trenton, New Jersey.

Q: That he was in his caterpillar phase. Did he become a butterfly during his governorship or after?

James J. Florio: Actually the second term I think you started to see it; maybe it was just the comfort level of being free from the dictates of politics. He then became a little more expansive, started with some of his humor. And then it was after he left office that he really blossomed into what he is now; which is really an interesting raconteur, and someone that has a reputation of being a very, very humorous guy. I'm assuming he always had a sense of humor, but it just didn't blossom until a later point.

Q: Was he controversial by the end? I remember things like out-of-state travel and helicopters and that kind of thing.

James J. Florio: Yes.

Q: Was he controversial?

James J. Florio: Well I wouldn't say controversial in the sense that we think of controversy nowadays. Were there periodic news stories about some of the out-of-state trips; his daughter using a state car or something one time? But day stories; not in the way that we do things now where we really beat things to death. And you didn't have the same type of antagonism that seems to be the norm in politics in this day and age.

Q: Did he get a good press generally?

James J. Florio: I think yes. The governor always did well. He would go to editorial boards, and the reports that I got back was that he was always perceived of as sort of honest, dedicated, committed to what he was doing. So you couldn't help but disbelieve those on the other side of the political aisle who would say bad things about somebody.

Q: Can you compare how he was as a campaigner in '77, as compared to '73?

James J. Florio: Well I think obviously he was much more comfortable-- everybody becomes more comfortable after you're in office for a period of time-- and clearly he was able-- and I assume somebody probably said something to him about looking somebody in the eye when you talk to them, might be a good idea; being a little more forceful in terms of the way you talk. If I recall-- and again, don't quote me on this-- but I think I remember reading something that he went to some kind of voice coach, or went to have some lessons from somebody who would teach him how to better present himself.

Q: I think I remember hearing about that as well. So we're in the second Byrne administration, and you start thinking about running for governor again.

James J. Florio: Yes.

Q: When?

James J. Florio: Well I guess after the election in '81 I was thinking about it. I just took myself out of it for awhile. But the '81 point was when the governor was coming to an end of his term. I thought it was something that I could do. I started moving around the state. The 1977 primary experience was a good learning experience. I corrected a whole lot of difficulties.

Q: Such as?

James J. Florio: Well understanding that you couldn't be everywhere at the same time. Understanding that I just couldn't be a South Jersey person, I had to go spend time in North Jersey. And again, there were people that I've become very close friends with that all came from the '77 campaign. My current law partner, Mike

Perrucci, was the county chairman up in Warren County. George Zoffinger was the county chairman up in Sussex County. So I met a whole lot of people who've become friends in that '77 experience. And so I just built on that in '81, and had a heated primary campaign, but won it because we had done all of the wise things about having a state-wide campaign, as opposed to a South Jersey based campaign.

Q: I can't recall. How many candidates were there in the Democratic primary in 1981?

James J. Florio: A lot; I think five or six. The most formidable one was Congressman Roe, if I recall correctly.

Q: That's right. That was the year there were about 10 in the Republican primary, as I recall.

James J. Florio: There was a big number in both primaries, yes.

Q: I was the editor of *New Jersey Monthly* at the time, and we put a sardine can on the cover and had all these little sardines lined up in the can, with little candidate faces on them.

James J. Florio: Must have been very profound.

Q: So Congressman Roe was your toughest rival in the primary that year?

James J. Florio: Yes, we had a number of people. There was the mayor of Jersey City, Tommy Smith, was a formidable candidate everyone thought.

Q: Do you remember what you won the primary by?

James J. Florio: A big margin.

Q: A big margin.

James J. Florio: Yes.

Q: Who were the key bosses around the state back in those days, Democratic?

James J. Florio: Well in Middlesex County it was still the Wilentz family. And there was a state senator up in Passaic County. Hudson County, of course, had-- I forget what the fellow's name was. But Tommy Smith and this other fellow, who I guess was the county chairman, were kind of the big deals there. So you had your traditional-- it was sort of the end of the all-powerful, almost dictatorial chairmen, at that period of time.

Q: Angelo Errichetti had been a boss in Camden, and then he ran afoul of the law in Abscam. I guess that was before you ran for governor.

James J. Florio: Yes, that was-- that started when Bill Bradley ran. I supported Bill Bradley, against Governor Byrne's choice of Dick Leone.

Q: Why did you support Bradley?

James J. Florio: Well because first of all I didn't like Dick Leone at the time. And over and above that I was having problems with the political organization in my own area. I was sort of on the outs with the political organization, many of whom, as you indicated, ultimately went to jail. But I just decided to take an independent course and ran with Bill Bradley against the county organization, and prevailed. And then the next year ran a whole slate of candidates against the organization, and prevailed again. And that was kind of the change in Camden County from the old Democratic regime to a much more modern, I think, attractive group of Democrats, who have prevailed in Camden County all this period of time.

Q: You ran a freeholders slate.

James J. Florio: A freeholders slate, legislative slate. Kenny Gewertz was on the other side; some other people were on the other side.

Q: Was Lewis Katz on your slate?

James J. Florio: Lewis Katz was a freeholder, if I recall correctly.

Q: On your slate?

James J. Florio: On our slate, yes.

Q: Errichetti had helped school you in politics. Was it difficult to chart a new path away from someone who had maybe been your mentor at some point?

James J. Florio: Well it wasn't really my choice; it was their choice. They were just sort of demanding things that I didn't think were reasonable; insisting upon positions and issues that I thought were just off the mark; and obviously I think I was subsequently proved correct. So I just was not comfortable with some of the leadership that we had there, and picked new leadership. Maria Greenwald was something that we discovered-- the mayor of Cherry Hill-- who was the mother of Assemblyman Greenwald. She was a citizen. We sort of advertised in the papers for people who wanted to run for office. People came in, we screened people, and she was one of the people that was-- I think she was a PTA person in Cherry Hill.

Q: So when you look at Lou Greenwald perform now, you think that you sort of helped create him?

James J. Florio: Well ask him. I think he will say he can remember-- he teases me that he was a kid in the room when his mother was giving coffee klatches for me, as a congressman, and I was out campaigning for her, as a freeholder.

Q: Don is reminding me that Brendan Byrne in 1981 had his own candidate for governor, his attorney general, John Degnan. He backed him. At any point did Byrne say to you, "Hey Jim, I want John. Maybe you could wait awhile."

James J. Florio: No he never did that, he never did that. But he was clearly supporting the attorney general; who was a wonderful person. But I think he came in third or fourth, if I recall correctly.

Q: Did you ever go to them and say, "It's my turn Governor or Attorney-General--"?

James J. Florio: Not my style, not my style.

Q: So you get the nomination, and then it was a very hard fought campaign.

James J. Florio: Took about a month to do the recount. The number 1797 sticks in my mind as the number of votes out of 2½ million that was the difference between myself and Governor Kean.

Q: Closest gubernatorial election in state history.

James J. Florio: Yes.

Q: Took a month to recount the votes. Do you recall election night that year?

James J. Florio: Oh yes.

Q: Where were you?

James J. Florio: I was in-- I think we were in Cherry Hill; I think we were in Cherry Hill at one of the restaurants down there. That was our state headquarters. Yes, a long night.

Q: What's an experience like this like, when you've campaigned hard for four months and there's no result?

James J. Florio: Less than satisfying, to be told that "we don't know", after all this period of time. And then to watch the ballots being counted; and in those days-- and I guess maybe in some respects still-- in some of the rural counties there were paper ballots that had to be counted, in Salem County and Sussex County and places of that sort. So it took a long period of time.

Q: When you look back on that experience, is it a bitter experience, a bitter memory?

James J. Florio: No, no.

Q: What kind of memory is it?

James J. Florio: I don't think-- you don't get bitter in politics; there's nothing to really get bitter about. Somebody wins, somebody loses. I guess what you do is think about the things you might have done; but you can drive yourself crazy when you have that kind of a small margin. There was a Polish fellow, Chester Grabowski, who had a newspaper called *The Polish Eagle*, who was running in the campaign, as an independent. Two weeks out he said, "You know what? I think you're really the best candidate. I'm going to endorse you." I think he got like 16,000 votes or something-- almost any third party candidate will get something-- and his newspaper, *The Polish Eagle*, had an endorsement of me that came out the Thursday after the Tuesday of the election. And so Chester Grabowski's votes might very well have made a difference. Another thing that I recall about that election was something called the Ballot Security Taskforce; this was something that is memorable as well. And there was the national Republican organization and the state Republican organization, hiring off-duty policemen and sheriff's guards, with armbands, going to polling places in minority districts, posting signs, which are clearly illegal, warning people that they should do nothing illegal or they would be subject to penalties, including jail. And there's no doubt in my mind that in fact that was designed to sort of inhibit people from voting. And to the degree that some of the people who were inhibited might have been supporters of mine, that was something that was very troubling. And the irony, of course, is that we went to court after the election and got a judgment against the Republican organization that was just a judgment saying 'you shall never do this again'; which was satisfying, I guess, of sorts.

Q: How are relations between you and Tom Kean?

James J. Florio: Oh they've been good over the years. Again, we've talked on a number of occasions. And one of the points I made earlier is that we sort of lamented the way campaigns have deteriorated in terms of civility over the years. We went through that campaign without, to my recollection, any negativity. I would say what I wanted to do, he would say what he wanted to do, and it was left at that. So there weren't negative ads of any sort; because that was prior to the current atmosphere.

Q: We're running out of time for this session, but we hope to continue this project with you as the focus, in the future. In the meantime let me ask you about the evolution of the office of governor, since you first sought it in 1977; and now you watch it pretty closely. Has it gotten weaker, stronger, changed, institutionally grown? How do you view the changes?

James J. Florio: Yes. Well it's a mixed bag. The discipline in the legislature, between the legislature and the governor's office, I think has deteriorated to a certain extent. There's more free agents; the ability to put together a coalition to enact legislative positions, legislative initiatives, is not as easy as it was. I was very fortunate without an office; I had strong legislative leaders, and people who were willing to go do tough things, because they thought they were the right things to do, and be able to muster the majorities, to be able to get things through. I think the

ability to do that is much less now than it was, in large measure because people are much less dependent upon political organizations. They're more dependent upon individual funding sources. So everybody can be their own free agent, and it makes it much more difficult to put together coalitions.

Q: Is that a bad thing?

James J. Florio: I think it is, I think it is. I think there's a need for a much more intellectual discipline. I don't mean everybody has to march to the same drummer, but I think you do need to have people line up philosophically behind initiatives, and if everyone is out on there their own, making up their own mind about basic core values, that's not a good thing.

Q: What would you most like to change about New Jersey government or politics, if you could change something?

James J. Florio: Well the money part I think is really most troubling. I ran for Congress, as I said, in 1974; I raised and spent, in a successful campaign, \$90,000. Nowadays people run for local council in a town and don't spend- they spend more than that. So I think decision makers have to spend entirely too much time raising money. That detracts from their ability to perform their jobs. I'm not even talking about inappropriate influence. I'm talking about time and the consumption of energy, raising money, as being a factor as well.

Q: Do you still believe that the New Jersey governor is the most powerful of the 50 state governors?

James J. Florio: Yes. No, I've interacted, through the Governors Association, and still interact with governors around the-- and they have great envy for our governor; particularly the judicial system that we have, with the disproportionate influence-- which is good-- of the governor on populating our judicial system with quality people. I regard it as almost insane to have elected judges. I've been in states where they have fundraisers, where defense attorneys for Judge Jones or antitrust lawyers for Judge Smith-- that's something that makes no intellectual sense to me; and our system is really the best.

Q: In the governor's outer office, when you look up and you see the portraits of the most recent governors-- you're up there, Christie Whitman's up here, Dick Codey's up there, Don DiFrancesco I think is up there, I think Tom Kean is still up there, Brendan Byrne I think is still up there-- how do you-- did I leave somebody out? Jim McGreevey is up here. How do you regard Brendan Byrne in this line, going backwards and forwards? How do you regard him?

James J. Florio: Well I regard him really as a model of integrity; and I don't mean just honest integrity, I mean intellectual integrity was well. When he wanted to do things that he thought were important, the odds didn't make any difference. He would run into sort of the army of opposition and would not retreat. And as a result of that-- and that's half the battle in this day and age. We have too many what I've

described over the years as weathervane politicians; people who at the first note of opposition to anything will retreat. You've got to be able to punch through that first veneer of opposition to anything, and then get on the other side of it, and then make your case. If you can make your case, if you're willing to make your case, and you prevail, then you'll be judged by the results. But if you never truly try to make your case, because you retreat as soon as there's opposition to anything you want to do-- and there will always be some opposition-- nothing ever happens. So we're in a marking time period of time where we don't have people who are willing-- as Brendan Byrne was willing, in the Pinelands, with the income tax, with the other things that I regard as heroic-- if you don't have that, then you're not going to have the degree of leadership that you need to advance the interests of the state.

Q: Thanks for talking to us Governor.

James J. Florio: My pleasure.

End of James J. Florio 10-9-2008