

Michael Aron: It is the afternoon of September 13th, 2006. I am Michael Aron of NJN News. We are about to interview Governor Byrne. This will be the fourth interview we have done with the Governor for the Byrne Archive project, part of the Rutgers Project on the Governor. We are going to talk to him about the tail end of the income tax fight and other first term accomplishments. Governor, in our last conversation, you walked us through getting the income tax passed, how difficult it was, how it took two, three years. Three years, I guess, and how the court decision really helped push it over. Is that correct?

Brendan Byrne: Well, the fight about the income tax is now classically used as an example of how you can use the coordination of branches of government to work together to get an objective. And that was a pretty good example. We used the legislature to introduce the bill. We used the judicial to push forward on the need for a tax or some solution to the education project, and you needed executive to make the original proposal.

Q: Without the *Robinson vs. Cahill* decision, do you think the income tax would have been enacted during your time in office?

Byrne: Probably not. I mean, *Robinson vs. Cahill* gave rise to the need for doing something. And by the way, the income tax that was passed was not an income tax to raise more money. It was an income tax to raise different money. And when I campaigned in '77, I made that point that I was not asking for more money. I was just asking for a different pocket. And so the net net of all of that was basically I had the same amount of money, but a good portion of it from an income tax, and the income tax was used to support the school.

Q: Did property taxes go down as a result?

Byrne: Yeah. As a matter of fact, they did. Trouble is when property taxes go down, does not take long for people to bring them back up again. And that is what's, as we sit here in 2006, that is what's making the people very cynical today because they have seen it. They have seen, you know, money wasted. They have seen educational things become. You give me an extra dollar and the teachers want part of it, and the schools want part of it, and the standards keep going up. If you are spending more, I want to spend more. That is the problem that people are very cynical about today.

Q: Your income package contained caps on spending growth at the local level, didn't it?

Byrne: Yes, it did, but there were exceptions to the cap of various things.

Q: Would you call it a tight cap or a loose cap that was easy to get around?

Byrne: It was what we thought was a fairly tight cap, but exigencies were justified and it kept growing. And then you had, you know, had whatever Short Hills had as it's procurable. Everybody wanted that to begin with, and then it grows and feeds on itself.

Q: Were there caps on both municipal and school district spending as part of your income tax?

Byrne: You know, I am not physically aware of that being so, but I think it was.

Q: We are now 30 years after the fact, and state finances are terribly strained, as are local finances. I mean, this state has a serious fiscal problem as the current governor, Corzine, has told us, and other governors have told us. Is that in spite of the tax you passed and created in the '70s? What happened in the intervening years?

Byrne: Well, first of all, we have demanded a lot more. When I look at the current budget and see some of the things that we are funding, all of which are justified, and when I see all the money we are borrowing, most of which is not justified. I do not think it is justified. That I think it explains a lot. And I think what Corzine may do, and I am speaking now for posterity, is sell some capital assets, like a turnpike, in order to get us back even so that from now on it is not just a huge debt that we are servicing with a major portion of the budget. Once you start getting rid of debt service, for example, it is going to help make it easy. And I think other states that are getting along well today, are getting along because they do not have the inbred obligations to pay bond editions, pay off bonds.

Q: You said New Jerseyans ask a lot of their government. Is government doing more today than it was doing in your day?

Byrne: When I first came into government, working for Governor Meyner in 1955, the total state budget was under a half a million dollars. And now what is it, 30 billion and counting? And that does not even account for the money we get off budget, like federal grants and so forth. So it has changed dramatically, and people expect things of government now that they did not expect 50 years ago. And if you look at the budget and see what we are funding, not only the Christmas tree items, some of which are justified, but all in all. And we get these conflicting demands on government. You get an editorial one day in the paper that says we are spending too much money. We are wasting too much money. And then the next day there is an editorial about we are not doing enough for kids under the DYFS Program. We are not spending enough on school teachers. I mean, we have to have better school teachers, and we have to do this and that. So we have just a Jekyll and Hyde kind of approach to all of this.

Q: You also said that some of the borrowing was not necessary, but haven't we borrowed to buy up open space, and to improve transportation infrastructure?

Byrne: And now to do stem cell research. It is hard to turn down any of this borrowing in terms of the merit of the project. But this is not something state government was into 50 years ago. We were not borrowing to do much other than maybe to build college dormitories. And Hughes did a lot of that. Or, you know, things that were highways, for instance, and to do our match for the highway. So it has changed. I mean, you know, we are asking for it and then we are protesting that we have to pay for it.

Q: Let's talk about some other things during your first term, the Sports Authority. Before you became governor, you told us about the financing almost falling apart to get the Meadowlands Sports Complex built, and how it was rescued. I think you said that Prudential was involved.

Byrne: Um hm.

Q: In the financial rescue. But then you take office. At what stage is the Meadowlands Sports Complex when you take office?

Byrne: No, no. When I was elected. When I was elected, and before I took office, I had a critical decision to make, and that was to try to get the financing. And when we looked at, and I had a couple of people looking at it. I think Jim Zazzali and Lew Kaden, among a small group that looked at it, we decided that we were giving the Giants too much control over the stadium. So the first thing I had to do was take a look at that. I decided that it was too much. We had a meeting with the Giants at the Princeton Club in New York, and we told them what we would sign off on, and gave them 24 hours to respond.

Q: Had you been elected?

Byrne: I had been elected, but not sworn in. And Bill Cahill was going for the deal as it had been designed, which I was not. And I remember Cahill calling me one day while I am Governor-Elect, and he said, "I have to have this bill on the board this afternoon. And if I don't, I am going to have a press conference and declare the deal dead." And I said, "Governor", I said, "you can do that if you want to. I wouldn't." I said, "You know, I think I can explore something which would be acceptable to me and to this administration if I had a little time." And Cahill hung up and called me back later this afternoon and he said, "I have decided not to post the bill." And he gave me the time, and it was during that time when we worked out a deal that made sense. Werblin never forgave me for that one.

Q: Why not?

Byrne: Because he wanted to go forward, wanted to go forward with the deal that he had made.

Q: Was he the head of the Sports and Exposition Authority?

Byrne: Sure. I think he was frankly the inspiration for that Sports Authority.

Q: Who put him in charge of the Sports Authority?

Byrne: Cahill.

Q: And you kept him there?

Byrne: Oh, sure. I mean, if you got a commodity like Sonny Werblin willing to donate time for running a sports authority, it is a terrific deal for New Jersey.

Q: Who was Sonny Werblin?

Byrne: Sonny Werblin had been head of MCA [Music Corporation of America]. This is an entertainment business. And he was well known nationally. I remember meeting Alfred Hitchcock one time in California. And the first thing he said to me, after he found out I was Governor of New Jersey, was "How is Sonny Werblin?" And so anywhere you went in the entertainment business, people knew and respected Sonny Werblin. He just gave away too much.

Q: Was he an owner of the Jets football team?

Byrne: Yes. He was owner of the Jets. He was also an owner of Monmouth Park. He was a partner of Leon Hess. They had a little falling out eventually, but that was part of the team. So that was part of the Jets. But it was Sonny who broke off heading the Sports Authority. The guys, David Wilentz and the rest of the group were definitely afraid that the Sports Complex would draw from Monmouth Park, which they owned and David Wilentz had a great interest in. The Middlesex County Democratic Organization, headed by David Wilentz, who was very powerful and very well respected. I had a great admiration for David, and did not want a sports complex built, nor did a lot of other people, like environmentalists. I think a number of environmentalists were violently opposed.

Q: Maybe that is a lesson that the environmentalists are not always right.

Byrne: Yeah. It turned out that the sports complex did not hurt the environmental, you know, component of the state.

Q: I am a little unclear. Sonny Werblin was the President of MCA.

Byrne: Had been.

Q: Had been. Did he become an owner of the Jets before he was chairman of the Sports Authority, or later? Do you recall?

Byrne: You know, I do not remember. It may have been later. Do not hold me to that. No.

Q: So Cahill makes him the head of the Sports Authority. He is a New Jerseyan or a New Yorker?

Byrne: He was a New Yorker, but Sonny always used the word megalopolis, in which he tried to explain that this is not New Jersey and New York. This is an overall megalopolis without borders. And it was as much New Jersey as New York. And that is a good philosophy, by the way, and should be used more. Anyway, that was his concept, and he sold that in New York.

Q: What was his style? What was he like?

Byrne: Sonny was a guy who ran around a racetrack complex in the Meadowlands picking up gum wrappers. And his theory was that it has got to start from the top, and you had to have perfection. And he insisted on it. And it set a tone for how that sports complex was run.

Q: At what point was it built? Was it already built by the time you became governor?

Byrne: No. I put a symbolic shovel in the ground, I think, but there was nothing structurally in place at all. And if we had walked away from it, nobody would have noticed.

Q: So during your first term, it got built.

Byrne: We built it. We built it.

Q: And you kept Werblin on through this period.

Byrne: Yeah. We had to build the racetrack sort of first, because we had to have a financial source for dealing with the sports complex. If we did not have the racetrack, the racetrack on paper was probably the only profit center in the Meadowlands. The Giant Stadium was not particularly. As a matter of fact, the racetrack justified the building of Giant Stadium. And without the racetrack, Giant Stadium was not feasible.

Q: You said that David Wilentz was against the building of sports complex. Monmouth Park is thoroughbreds and it is harness racing up at the Meadowlands.

Byrne: Both.

Q: It is both.

Byrne: Yeah.

Q: Okay. I thought maybe that was an accommodation to him to make it a harness track.

Byrne: No. No. A harness track was more successful, so there was constant talk about eliminating thoroughbred racing at the Meadowlands because we had the premier harness track in the world, but not the premier flat track. But that has not gotten very far, and we are part of a circuit in flat track racing. Anyway. But seriously, the harness racing is what makes the Meadowlands Racetrack a first class facility.

Q: So the track got built first, then the stadium and then the arena?

Byrne: Yeah. And the arena much later.

Q: Did you try to get the Giants to drop New York from their name?

Byrne: No. For some reason, it was a given that they would stay in New York. I think we got them to, instead of having New York on the helmets, to just have Giants on the helmet, and that was an accomplishment in itself. But Wellington Mara would never have consented to be called the New Jersey Giants, maybe the Giants, but not the New Jersey Giants.

Q: Oren Kramer was a key aide on the Sports Authority financing and during the '73 campaign. What are your recollections of Oren?

Byrne: My recollections of Oren Kramer, that he became my teacher during the early days of the '73 campaign. Before I would go on television, I would have to spend an hour with Oren. He would run me through what was anticipated as the questioning, and help me with the pro forma answers to the questions, and then let me off. They did not have any great confidence in me as a candidate when I first came in. I had no political experience. I had been a judge. I was not, you know, up to date on all of the issues. And so they felt that I needed an Oren Kramer, and I probably did. And he would brief me on issues and claimed to have some insight into what questioners were interested in his view. It was helpful.

Q: So you remember him more in connection with the '73 campaign than with the Sports Authority project.

Byrne: Yeah. The Sports Authority stuff sort of filtered through Dick Leone and Lew Kaden.

Q: Your key people.

Byrne: Yeah. Yeah.

Q: What else do you remember about the early days of the Sports Complex? Do you remember the first football game?

Byrne: Sure. And I do not know. Thank God it is changed now, but in those days politicians of sporting events got booed lustily, no matter what. And certainly when the racetrack opened, and the racetrack was the first thing that opened before the stadium. When the racetrack opened and I participated in the opening publicly, I got booed unmercifully, because it was also the first time that there had been a withholding of a state income tax from your paycheck.

Q: Same week.

Byrne: And people, yeah. And people were ready to kill me. I mean, we really felt we might be in some physical danger. And so forget about I built the racetrack. People were remembering. And we went through a lot of hard times at that time. But we got it done. We got it done. And eventually in 1977 when we ran for reelection, we ran on the theory that we got things done. You do not have to love me, but I got things done, and I hope you vote for me.

Q: Some critics said that the stadium would create massive traffic jams. Were you worried?

Byrne: Well, we worried enough so that we did explore rail access to the Sports Complex. And we tried trains into New York and shuttle buses into the stadium. And people did not go for it. And so bad as the traffic is, it is not impossible, and people would rather take the car still.

Q: And now 30 years later they are still talking about a rail link into the Meadowlands.

Byrne: Well, with the proposed new stadium, they are talking about a very convenient rail access, so you get off the train and into the stadium. No switching into.

Q: I can understand why a New Jerseyan would not want to take a train into Manhattan and cross the Hudson twice.

Byrne: I do not think you have to do that.

Q: No. But back in those days, if you were, say you could take the train.

Byrne: Probably, yeah.

Q: At a station, and then a shuttle bus.

Byrne: Yeah, yeah.

Q: What did it mean to New Jersey to have a professional football team playing?

Byrne: Oh, I think it was a plus for New Jersey, even though it said New York, yeah, on the uniform. The fact that we now had a professional football team playing in New Jersey, and the mayor in New York wanted to see a New York football team, you had to come to New Jersey. And we exploited that.

Q: How?

Byrne: A little bit. Well, by pointing it out and inviting the mayor and governor to come over. Incidentally, Hugh Carey was not a big fan of the New York Giants football team, and did not fight too hard to have them stay in New York. Rockefeller did, but Hugh Carey did not. And so he was a sort of a good riddance. I do not think he got along too well with Wellington Mara.

Q: Interesting.

Byrne: And so that part was easy.

Q: So had he been more of a Giants fan or a better friend of Wellington Mara, New Jersey might have had a tougher time getting the Giants?

Byrne: No. But because Hugh would have had to find a home for the Giants. And at that point, he only talked about building a stadium over the rail yards. They really hadn't a good location for the Giants in New York. Still don't. Came up again a year or so ago, and so New Jersey was and is the logical home.

Q: This was the first major professional sports team. No. Was the first major professional sports team in the State of New Jersey, or were the Nets already?

Byrne: Major league team.

Q: Major league, yeah.

Byrne: Guys like me remember the old Newark Bears that were better than the Yankees for awhile, in Ruppert Stadium in Newark. But, yes, that was the first major league sports. We had been having discussions with the Yankees, because the Yankees had been unhappy with the status of Yankee Stadium and with the support the Yankees were getting from New York. And I had several very preliminary discussions with George Steinbrenner about moving the Yankees to New Jersey.

Q: Was he interested?

Byrne: George said to somebody in the last couple of years, if the president stayed there, we would be over in New Jersey. But I think that was a, you know, a nice complement to me, but I think the Yankees had to stay, not only in New York, but in the Bronx.

Q: There is a lot of interest in the Meadowlands yet again, because it is going through a new phase in its life, because a new project has been started and not finished. And the Nets are leaving and the Devils are leaving, most likely. Has the Meadowlands been a success or a failure?

Byrne: Well, first of all, the teams that are leaving are still there. And so from that standpoint, it is a success. Whether the Nets will ever actually go from New York, and whether the Devils will ever go to

Newark, is as we sit here problematical. And actually the Meadowlands has been a location from the standpoint of-- the only thing wrong with the Meadowlands Arena, first of all it has got the wrong name now, but is that they do not have enough luxury boxes. The Arena, itself, is an ideal location for watching both hockey and basketball. I have never heard anybody complain that you do not have a good seat at the Meadowlands Arena. And so what is drawing away from the Meadowlands, is the fact that there are not enough luxury boxes. And so we will see how that plays out.

Q: Couldn't they have retrofitted some luxury boxes into the existing?

Byrne: They did at one point. I mean, they certainly did it at the Giants Stadium. I am not sure they sell out the boxes at the Arena even now. And they are going to find it hard to sell those 200 boxes at the new Giants-Jets Stadium. You watch.

Q: Really?

Byrne: Yeah. And I think there may even be something in a contract that allows them to back out if they cannot pre-sell them.

Q: Back out of the whole stadium deal?

Byrne: Yeah.

Q: You brought up the name of the Meadowlands Arena, which is now the Continental Airlines Arena. We might as well bring up that controversy here, while we are on the subject. I guess it was at the end of your second term that your aide decided that a fitting memorial to you and your two terms in office would be to put your name on that arena. Is that correct?

Byrne: I did not do that.

Q: I did not say you did that. Your aides.

Byrne: Well, no. The Authority itself suggested it. As a matter of fact, their original suggestion was that they name the racetrack after Cahill and the arena after me. And I thought that was fine. Cahill decided he did not want that. And so it was left with just naming the arena. I did not want the racetrack, because they would have called it the Byrned Downs. And I figure, let that one alone.

Q: So around 1982, your name went up and stood up there until Governor Whitman ordered it down.

Byrne: Yeah.

Q: Some 10 or 12 years later. Tell the story.

Byrne: No. All of a sudden I got a call that they sold the naming rights. And that did not upset me as much as you may think.

Q: You joke about it to this day.

Byrne: Oh, absolutely. And Continental has been a good citizen for New Jersey. It is a great airline, and I am not-- it does not keep me awake any nights.

Q: You had crossed her politically right around that time, too. I think it had to do with.

Byrne: Yes.

Q: Bob Mulcahy's tenure as the head of the Sports Authority. When she took office, she wanted to make a change, and the Authority Board extended his contract. You were on the Authority.

Byrne: Sure.

Q: You voted for that.

Byrne: I introduced it.

Q: Was this payback from Governor Whitman?

Byrne: Oh, may have been. But I think I saved her from making a big mistake. I mean, Bob Mulcahy was totally professional, and he knew how to run that Sports Authority, and was doing a good job at it and had the respect of everybody in the sports world. And now when we hear rumors that he is going to be fired and that maybe some political person will be put in charge, it portended disaster. And I think today she would admit that I was right and she was wrong on that issue. Now, I can understand also that she is

now the governor and the first full day she is governor, she called me. And I was flattered that that was her first priority to get rid of me, and told me she was replacing me. But I think did her a favor. I really do.

Q: The Meadowlands was once viewed as a more comprehensive community with housing and commercial space and so on. That has not really happened.

Byrne: I do not think it was, not housing. It may have been an incentive for development, but that was not part of the original plan. There was an aquarium in the original plan, and that was abandoned and transferred to Camden, as you remember. But this was not like the thing in Brooklyn, which was planned as a whole overall development. As I knew it, it was just the sports complex itself, with maybe an arena.

Q: Do you have a feeling about Xanadu as an add-on to the original concept? I mean, some people are saying this is just a mall, a glorified mall.

Byrne: I do not know what they are going to do with Xanadu. I mean, with the ski slope and all of that, and how that fits in with the sports teams. I have never been able to get my arms around that deal.

Q: You are not enthusiastic about it.

Byrne: No. I just do not know enough about it. I mean, how real it all is. How far along they are. How feasible it is. How it is being financed. It is just a lot of ifs for me. My personal preference would have been to leave the whole thing as it was. It was a very nice sports complex with no circuses and no bazaars and no, you know, flea bags, flea circuses. Anyway.

Q: Flea markets I think they call them.

Byrne: Yeah, flea market. Right. And billboards. That has been added since my concept of it. And if you see a picture of it from the early '80s, it was a nice looking enterprise. And it did not look commercialized. It looked first class New Jersey, which is what I was interested in.

Q: Was that your vision of New Jersey, trying to make everything first class in this gritty industrial state?

Byrne: Well, it would not hurt to have some- yeah. Yeah. First class, nice New Jersey. You know, I started with the Pinelands, wanting the pristine Pinelands preserved. And I think that the Meadowlands had that. Atlantic City even, which is another one of my babies, should be first class and it is shaping up that way.

Q: You dealt with Wellington Mara, the Giants owner, a fair amount?

Byrne: Yeah.

Q: What was he like?

Byrne: Tough, a very nice guy, very nice, smooth, old fashioned Irishman, soft spoken, but do not try to get anything by him, and totally committed to the Giants.

Q: Did you frequent the Sports Complex a lot?

Byrne: When I was governor?

Q: Yes.

Byrne: Yes. Yeah. The governor has a box at the Giants Stadium. And I would go to a lot of games, not nearly all of them, but matter of fact Mrs. Mara thought I brought bad luck to the Giants.

Q: What did you think?

Byrne: Actually, I even leave the game early and they would be ahead, and then I would leave they would lose.

Q: I believe during your first term, you took Liberty Park in Jersey City and turned it into Liberty State Park? Tell us about that.

Byrne: Well, I knew nothing about Liberty State Park, except it was there. And one day I think David Bardin, who was my environmental commissioner, started a concept of making it into a major state park and attraction. And I remember his getting some help from Prudential Insurance Company, and making a presentation to some business leaders, and causing some excitement. And frankly, I give David Bardin credit for taking that off the moribund list and bringing it to fruition. David Bardin does not get enough credit for Liberty State Park. David was my environmental commissioner, and was a very interesting guy, a very dedicated guy, controversial, and a character.

Q: Where did you get him from?

Byrne: When I hired him he was doing some project in Israel. There is no analogy there, but he was.

Q: Yeah. We spoke about him when we talked about filling your cabinet. That is coming back to me what a character you said he was. What about the cities. Were they a focus of your first term?

Byrne: Yes. I think probably one of my failures. I did not do enough to get the cities rehabilitated. That is a tough job. It is still not where it should be. And I try doing things like insisting that any new state offices be located in cities like Newark or Trenton, rather than in the suburbs. And a couple of other things to help the cities and give money to this project or that project, this hospital, that hospital. I always felt that there was a lot that could be done if we had the money, but we never really had the money. And we worked, for instance, with the Archdiocese of Newark, because that had an original concept of building from the Sacred Heart Cathedral all the way down to Penn Station, cleaning that whole area up. It never much got off the ground. The concept was good and you have to do it in big chunks. You cannot take a block in Newark. We tried to do it with James Street. But you have to change the whole.

Q: Talk about James Street for a second, because that is interesting. It is a block or two in downtown Newark near the museum that looks like a very gentrified part of Manhattan or Brooklyn.

Byrne: Exactly. But the trouble is it is surrounded by too much blight and too many problems. And so James Street, good idea. Would not be a bad place to live. But it does not have a character, a neighborhood character that it needs. And that is what we needed.

Q: Newark was still probably suffering white flight in the '70s on the heels of the '67 riot. Yes?

Byrne: Yeah. And where you do see it coming back now is it starts with the medical school, and the area around the medical school, hospital and the medical school, is broadening out little by little into better housing and better neighborhoods, and you are seeing some change. But you almost have to do something wholesale. I mean, Camden is a good example. The only way to solve Camden's problem was to tear it down. And we are not ready to do that yet, but that is where I would go if I had the power and the money.

Q: Community schools also were built in cities with theaters, pools, other amenities for the neighborhood. Is this still a good concept?

Byrne: It is a good concept. How well it is working I am not sure. And one of the problems with some of the cities is you cannot maintain the kind of vision that you start out with. I mean, you build an athletic field and they tear it apart in almost no time. So it is a massive undertaking and I think Cory Booker in Newark is going to get somewhere with these concepts. And I think he is genuinely dedicated, willing to

put the time, effort, money and commitment into rehabilitating neighborhoods in Newark. But you have people living in hovels and places where it does not make sense. And you got to change that.

Q: Did you create the Economic Development Authority?

Byrne: Yes. Early on.

Q: Early on.

Byrne: We did that in the first term. Yes.

Q: Was that urban oriented or did it have other purposes?

Byrne: Well, it was sort of urban oriented. It was oriented to getting businesses a break in New Jersey, businesses that might not ordinarily have stayed in New Jersey. We use it for casino development, because they had no place else to go. They are sort of using it more now. But, yes, that worked, and it is still working. It is one of the major things we have in New Jersey.

Q: Was it an idea? Do you remember the genesis of the idea? Was it a campaign pledge? Was it a concept you brought into office? Was it somebody else's concept?

Byrne: Well, it came out of my administration. Yeah. Nobody else was doing it at the time. Everybody is doing it now. But, yeah.

Q: You said that Camden, that the best thing to do would be to tear it down and start all over again.

Byrne: Yeah.

Q: How about Atlantic City? In retrospect, would you have torn it down and started all over again?

Byrne: No. Could not do that. We started, in Atlantic City, first of all we started by everybody criticizing everything we did. I started being supportive of Atlantic City when early on in my term there was a nice lady by the name of Lillian Bryant, whose father I knew was the first black member of Dick Hughes' cabinet. So I got to know him. And I got to know Lillian. And so when she ran for some local office, I went down and spent a Sunday campaigning in some of the bad neighborhoods of Atlantic City. And I said to myself, we got to do something. And we explored. At one point we explored going out to see

Disney, see if he wants to come and build a Disneyland concept in Atlantic City. He said, "I don't make money in California until Thanksgiving." And so having three months or four months in Atlantic City, it was just not doable. So it was then we went into casino gambling. Atlantic City had long been on the downslide. I remember 1964, we had the Democratic National Convention in Atlantic City, and it was a disaster. The story is that George Meany, who was then head of the AFL-CIO comes in, and a former plumber, comes into one of the hotels. Goes up to his room, turns on the faucet and winds up with the faucet in his hand. And he goes down to the desk and says, "I am a plumber but I am on vacation." And so that is the kind of reputation we got out of that '64 convention. And it never recovered from that. So we had to do something. And we tried the casinos. It worked. Now, everybody said, "Well, it is only on the Boardwalk and the rest of it is still a failure." But if you go to Atlantic City, even today, and you walk from the Boardwalk to the new convention hall, you got a beautiful walk and you got a shopping area there. And the rest of Atlantic City is coming in behind that. There is still some bad areas, but there are some bad areas in Las Vegas, too.

Q: So state senator, Bill Gormley, deserves some credit for.

Byrne: I give him some credit because he has been able to keep things together in Atlantic City. He has been able to have the vision, been able to represent and be a spokesman for the casino industry. I do not like Bill Gormley, but I respect him, even though he fought me tooth and nail on the Pinelands.

Q: Did he?

Byrne: Yeah. And I can understand. I think he mellowed on that, too, because the original opposition to the Pinelands was from farmers who did not know what was happening. Their land was being restricted for development. Even if they were just farmers, you know, without any other agenda, they did have to use the land to borrow money to do their crops. And if I did the Pinelands and the value of the land was down, the security went down, and they had problems. I fully understand that.

Q: Whose idea was casino gambling? Do you recall?

Byrne: Oh, it had been promoted in Atlantic City for several years before, and nobody remembers this. But there was a bill in several years before I became governor sponsored by Hap Farley, which is a story in itself. And I actually testified in favor of that bill.

Q: Farley was the state senator from Atlantic County in those days before Gormley.

Byrne: Right.

Q: He was a Republican?

Byrne: Sure.

Q: So he was pushing for.

Byrne: He was the most powerful politician in South Jersey. There was a sentiment in Atlantic City that we got to have casino gambling at some point.

Q: And you testified in favor of it when you were, what, prosecutor?

Byrne: I was a judge. I was either a judge or I think probably a public utility commissioner. I do not think I testified as a judge. I think as a public utility commissioner. I had experience for nine years as a prosecutor, and I knew about Camden. As a matter of fact, there was an old saw at the time that legalizing gambling would be a ratification of what is going on. Let's call it a validating act.

Q: Because everybody was gambling illegally.

Byrne: Anyway.

Q: So after you took office and looked at Atlantic City and talked to Mr. Disney and learned that that was a pipe dream, you embraced casino gambling as the solution?

Byrne: First I embraced it. Well, first they put it on the ballot as legalizing gambling in New Jersey. And I did not support that and it failed. But the next year they put it back on the ballot, limited it to Atlantic City, which is what I said I would support. And I did. I supported casino gambling. I am told that I am the only governor in the 20th century who would have supported casinos in Atlantic City.

Q: Only New Jersey governor.

Byrne: Tom Kean voted against it. Still against it. Yeah.

Q: Jim Florio.

Byrne: Would not touch it. Cahill said it is the worst thing I ever did. And it needed a governor with my credentials, frankly, to be out front and guarantee the people that it could be run without organized crime running it.

Q: Who were the key casino industry people that you remember from that time?

Byrne: Gee. I do not remember much about who. I remember one thing I tried to do in all of this was to get some of the recognized hotel people, not solely casino people like, you know, Starnos [ph?] or something like that. I went to see the Marriotts and they would not touch it. They were Mormons and they would not sell Playboy. That did not work, so I gave up on them. But I did go down to see a man by the name of Kemmons Wilson, who had started Holiday Inn. And I thought that would be a nice name to have in Atlantic City. And Steve Perskie and I talked, went down to Memphis and sat with their Board, and I talked Kemmons Wilson into buying something in Atlantic City, which he did.

Q: Perskie at the time was state senator from Atlantic County?

Byrne: Yeah, the one that sponsored me.

Q: A Democrat.

Byrne: Yeah. I said this often. If it were not for Steve Perskie, I would not have supported the referendum, because I had great confidence that Steve Perske was a guy who was clean, who was smart, was knowledgeable, who would not let the thing get away from us.

Q: One of your most famous moments as governor, I guess it happened in the second term, was when you opened the first casino and gave a speech on the Boardwalk.

Byrne: That was the first term.

Q: That was the first term? Ah ha. Was it Resorts International that opened first?

Byrne: Yeah, yeah.

Q: And you recall what you said?

Byrne: When I opened it?

Q: Well, you said you had a message to the mob.

Byrne: Yes, to keep your filthy hands out of Atlantic City. Yeah.

Q: That line has resonated.

Byrne: And by the way, I had a state police superintendent whom I had full confidence in, name of Clint Pagano, and I had charged Clint Pagano with doing everything that the state police could do to keep casinos clean. And I think the word got out that they are just not going to tolerate this. And I do not think there was even a real effort to bring organized crime into any casinos, because we were so scrupulous in the licensing procedures. I mean we have turned down somebody because they had once hired a lawyer who had once represented some mobsters. And we made it so tough, and I do not think they wanted to tackle us.

Q: Some of your key people opposed the entire project, Dick Leone, Bill Hyland were against.

Byrne: John Degnan?

Q: Degnan is one of them.

Byrne: Sure. Sure. A lot of people opposed to it. They did not think I could do it. Most of them have come back and told me they were wrong.

Q: Was it a water cooler subject in your office?

Byrne: No. But, you know, Dick Leone comes in to say why do you want to be remembered as they guy that brought gambling into Atlantic City? And I do, because we did it and we did it honestly, and I am convinced that if we had not done it, and done it successfully, it would not be in existence anywhere else.

Q: You talk about how scrupulous you were in trying to keep the mob out. You set up two regulatory arms, the Casino Control Commission, that would license the casinos, and the Division of Gaming Enforcement, within the Attorney General's Office, that would.

Byrne: We patterned that basically after Nevada. I spent a fair amount of time studying what was going on in Nevada. I had several meetings with Harry Reid, now as we speak, the Democratic minority leader in the Senate.

Q: What was he back then?

Byrne: He was Attorney General.

Q: Oh.

Byrne: So, yeah. That is how we patterned it. We had a number of original decisions to make, one of which would have been to have one, big casino in Atlantic City, which was either publicly owned and run, or at least the one casino where everybody went to the hotels but then had to go to the casino. I think either Montreal or Toronto has that concept. But what we had, what we came up with, I think, works.

Q: That is interesting. It is so different from today from what it would have been had you gone with one casino.

Byrne: Maybe, yes. Who knows? I do not know how it is working in Canada, but apparently it is.

Q: To what extent was it part of your motivation in bringing casino gambling to Atlantic City to bring a little more excitement and attention to New Jersey?

Byrne: I think we did a number of things to build the excitement in New Jersey, casino gambling was one of them. In Atlantic City, I insisted, by the way that the casinos have live entertainment originally seven days a week. But that did not make sense in the winter time especially. But anyway, I wanted Atlantic City to be known as an entertainment center, and I figure now it is. I mean, recently I saw that Barbara Streisand is coming to Atlantic City. Would not have happened without me. And then we had the Meadowlands, which was an exciting thing. And we have used that to emphasize that there are a lot of other great things in New Jersey that become an attraction. I mean, even Princeton has a glamour aspect to it now.

Q: There were some pretty tight restrictions on the casinos when they first opened, no all night gambling, for example. Many of those restrictions have been eased up over the years. Were you perhaps too restrictive at the beginning?

Byrne: We may have been, but I think we got the message across. And I think today there is nobody saying we want to ease the restrictions so we can bring organized crime into areas without the restrictions. Organized crime is not today, even in Vegas, is not today a factor in casinos. I do not think organized crime owns a casino in Vegas.

Q: Did they in those days?

Byrne: Sure. Sure. As a matter of fact, I remember the district attorney was active in the national district attorney's association. We would meet from time to time in Vegas. And before I went to Vegas, I would call the FBI and I would say, "Where does J. Edgar Hoover stay when he goes to Vegas?" And I would stay wherever he stayed.

Q: Really.

Byrne: Yeah. And you know, I mean, you knew which mob owned which casino.

Q: There were also tough restrictions on casino marketing, controls on neon signs, on ads, TV ads, and so forth.

Byrne: Yeah. You could not see the casino from the Boardwalk.

Q: Uh huh. Not allowed to see into the casino from the Boardwalk?

Byrne: Some can.

Q: Was that overly restrictive?

Byrne: That was because I wanted, my point failed, but I wanted the Atlantic City revival to be part of what Atlantic City used to be, which was basically a family resort. That has not taken place, although in the summertime families go and the thing to do is bring the kids to the beach. But by and large people do not go to Atlantic City to have a vacation with the kids. They go to neighborhood beaches, and it has revived the New Jersey shore. I think Cape May has benefited from the fact that Atlantic City is close at hand. I mean, you can go to Cape May, one of the nice resort towns on Cape May and sneak up to Atlantic City at night. It is the last step.

Q: Did Cape May become the family resort on the shore?

Byrne: Oh, Cape May is a great family resort. Have you ever been there?

Q: Yeah.

Byrne: Oh, wonderful. A little old- there are a lot of good restaurants in Cape May. Sounds like my daughter is in charge of travel and tourism, doesn't it?

Q: When you talked about the mob in Vegas, I immediately thought of the Sands Hotel and Frank Sinatra and I mean, I do not know if the Sands was connected to the mob or not, but I remember that name and that image from that era. Did Sinatra have any role in Atlantic City? He is a New Jerseyan, a New Jersey native. Did he come back?

Byrne: Well, I think Sinatra made appearances in Atlantic City. I do not know that Sinatra ever had any interest in any casino in Atlantic City. And I got to know Frank Sinatra a little bit.

Q: When you were governor?

Byrne: Yeah.

Q: Tell us.

Byrne: How I got to know him?

Q: Yeah.

Byrne: I do not know how I got to know him when I got to know him, and then, yeah, I had dinner with him once or twice and mutual friends. But, yeah, I got to know him. And I actually played tennis with Barbara Sinatra a couple of times, and when I would see Frankie, say Barbara wants to know when you are going to play tennis with her again. That kind of small talk.

Q: Was he an important person in New Jersey when you were governor?

Byrne: Sure.

Q: He came from Hoboken.

Byrne: He came from Hoboken and he said nice things about me. We had some mutual friends. I still have on my wall an autographed picture of Frank Sinatra to me. And we would have conversations.

Q: I have a note.

Byrne: He never asked me to do anything. And you remember at one point he had a run in with Joel Jacobson, who was on the Casino Control Commission. Joel accused him of bullying somebody at the table to deal a single deck or something like that. So he had mixed emotions of New Jersey.

Q: Was there an SCI investigation?

Byrne: Sure.

Q: Of?

Byrne: I think of something that collateralized Frank, but I do not remember. I have one funny Frank Sinatra story. I was over in Hong Kong one time and some nice lady took care of my kids and, you know, gave them a tour of Hong Kong. And I am trying to figure out how to reciprocate. And so they said I am coming over with my two sisters, and we are big Frank Sinatra fans, and we would like to see Frank Sinatra. So he was at the Garden State Art Center. I arranged for these three young ladies to have their pictures taken with Frank Sinatra. And it worked. We got their pictures taken with Frank. Now, four months later, Frank is being interrogated by some, I think Congressional committee, about having his picture taken with some alleged mobsters. And Frank says in answer, "Hey, look, somebody brings in three girls from Hong Kong to have my picture taken. What do I care? What do I know about it?" I will never forget that. Frank also knew an old priest who was the song writer who I knew, and we would talk about the priest once in awhile.

Q: You mentioned that you wanted to keep state offices from being built in the suburbs or leased in the suburbs. You wanted to keep them in the cities like Trenton. Trenton is still a troubled city. Do you have any ideas on what could be done in Trenton?

Byrne: Well, Trenton is doing better, and I formed a separate building corporation in Mercer County that was doing building in Trenton. The Mary Roebling Building I think is an example. And so I did all I could under the circumstances to accommodate office buildings in downtown Trenton, and to discourage going out to the suburbs. There is a lot of it going on since, but that was my concept.

Q: What are the great cities of New Jersey?

Byrne: West Orange. That is my hometown, which I still regard as my hometown.

Q: Seriously, what are the cities? Give us your take on the cities. I mean, I say great cities and we do not have a great city. We have small cities, but what are the cities that mean something to you?

Byrne: I think you always start with Newark, Jersey City. I include Paterson, Bayonne, even some of the cities which you do not realize are cities. Hamilton Township, by the way, is a big city, votes more people than Trenton does. Woodbridge. It depends on what you are looking for. Phillipsburg, that is its name but it is a city.

Q: Trenton? You forgot the South. Trenton and Atlantic City and Camden.

Byrne: Trenton, Trenton, yeah. And Millville.

Q: And Millville.

Byrne: Yeah.

Q: Beautiful downtown Millville.

Byrne: Oh. I like it down there.

Q: It is almost like another country down there. I mean, not another country, but another state down there, isn't it?

Byrne: Yeah. I like Cumberland and Sale Counties.

Q: You like- pardon me? What?

Byrne: I like Cumberland and Salem Counties, sure.

Q: Bridgeton, that is a little city, isn't it?

Byrne: Yeah. Used to be where Campbell Soup made ketchup.

Q: Bridgeton?

Byrne: Sure. Pride of the Farm Ketchup, you know. Ah. That is another world.

End of Byrne (9/13/06)