

The Green Zone

By Patricia Dines



Adventures in Eco-Voting

Discerning between green fact and fiction

Nowadays, it seems that nearly everybody wants to be seen as green. It's not just corporations jumping onto the bandwagon; politicians and ballot measures are hopping aboard, too. It's heartening that, even in these challenging times, so many mainstream folks recognize the environment's vital role in our economy, health and survival.

Still, this issue's popularity brings a new challenge: we as voters and consumers can no longer simply accept eco-claims on face value. As the biofuel backlash so aptly demonstrates, we need to look beneath the surface, especially with so much at stake.

Consider, for example, presidential candidates **Barack Obama** and **John McCain**. Both speak for environmental causes such as alternative energy, which certainly is vital for addressing global warming, peak oil and more. But an analysis of the candidates' eco-credentials by the League of Conservation Voters (LCV) reveals a greater difference. While Obama receives a lifetime LCV rating of 86 percent for his consistent pro-earth votes, McCain achieves only 24 percent.

Similarly, in **Sonoma County's Fifth District Supervisor's** race, both **Rue Furch** and **Efren Carrillo** speak of eco-principles. But the details tell a different tale. Furch's history, positions, awards and presentation clearly reveal her as an eco-wonk, diligently toiling for decades on essential local environmental protections. She's been endorsed by the Sierra Club, Sonoma County Conservation Action and current supervisor Mike Reilly, who's upheld this seat's strong eco-tradition for the past 12 years.

Carrillo, on the other hand, has quite modest environmental experience and vague positions. Two-thirds of his campaign contributions come from the development industry, and most from outside the district, at least according

to Furch's analysis of campaign disclosure reports.

This same dissonance between green image and reality appears on California's ballot. While **state propositions 7 and 10** both profess to encourage alternative energy implementation, they're opposed by major environmental, business, labor, consumer and taxpayer groups. Critics feel that fundamental flaws would actually harm environmental progress and waste taxpayer dollars.

Now, I'm not suggesting that all eco-claims should be distrusted as just another reason for cynicism. Rather, I see environmentalism at a new stage, one that calls on us to increase our discernment and engage more deeply in specific implementation decisions.

For example, I do support **Proposition 2**, which seeks more humane conditions for farm animals while improving food safety and reducing water and air pollution. This proposal is endorsed by the Sierra Club, Center for Food Safety, Humane Society, California Council of Churches, California Veterinary Medical Association and others. Reading the official description and big business opposition, I'm amazed that we'd even debate whether pens should allow animals to "lie down, stand up, fully extend their limbs and turn around freely."

Other decisions are more complex, though, with sincere eco-people advocating notably different solutions. For instance, there's **Sebastopol's City Council** race, where those elected will determine the fate of the contested Northeast Area Plan (NEAP). On the one hand, NEAP's proponents feel that the current proposal to build intensively in the town's entry-area flood plain is ecological, based on New Urbanism's promotion of high-density and mixed-use. Candidate **Jen Thille** prominently features these claims for

NEAP in her "Sustainable Sebastopol" campaign.

However, after examining the specifics, the overwhelming majority of citizens commenting at NEAP's final hearings opposed this plan as too big for the small town, and ecologically and economically infeasible in this location. They questioned spending millions to overcome nature's flood plain and earthquake liquefaction zone. They saw those millions making the area's houses and businesses more costly, thwarting mixed-use and conflicting with the plan's targeted low-rent businesses. They determined that the unavoidably gridlocked traffic would block the plan's required influx of new shoppers, cannibalize current businesses, generate greenhouse gases and harm livability. Echoing these citizens is candidate **Guy Wilson**, who proposes downscaling NEAP to better respect natural and infrastructure limits, current businesses and the people's democratic choice. To me, this approach better embodies true green.

This is just a sample of the hidden eco-issues lurking on our ballots. By digging for the deeper story, we can all help ensure truly wise choices for our future world.

National LCV voting information is at www.lcv.org. California LCV endorsements of federal and California Congress people are at www.ecovote.org. A convenient summary of various group's proposition recommendations is at http://igs.berkeley.edu/library/hot_topics/2008/Nov2008Election/index.html. Local endorsements are at the Sierra Club's site www.sierraclub.org/ca; choose your local chapter.

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Published in the North Bay Bohemian, October 29, 2008.