

*Josh Becker*  
*Senate District 13*  
*Feb. 2, 2024 Zoom 4-5 PM*

## **Summary of League of Women Voters 2024 Legislative Interview**

Attending:

Eileen Easterbrook LWV North and Central San Mateo County  
Eleanor Yick LWV SWSCV  
Aileen Kao LWV SWSCV  
Donna Davies LWV LA/MV  
Lucia Tedesco LWV South San Mateo County  
Mary O'Kicki LWV Palo Alto  
Kevin Ma LWV LA/MV  
Ellen Wheeler LWV LA/MV  
Lisa Ratner LWV Palo Alto

Question 1. During the pandemic, zoom meetings increased public participation in public meetings but raised concerns about transparency. Two bills addressed these concerns: SB 544, which allows teleconferencing, passed, and SB 537 (your bill) did not. The League of Women Voters believes that changing open government rules deserves a comprehensive rather than a piecemeal look. What can we learn about open meetings from the pandemic experience, and what changes would you like to see in the law regarding open meetings? How can we increase public participation without losing accountability?

Sen. Becker: These reforms are part of an ongoing dialogue. What lessons can be learned from the pandemic? That's a good question. I don't know. I'd be interested in hearing that from you. The bill that passed (SB 544) is in effect for two years. Let's see how that goes. My bill was introduced at the request of Peninsula Clean Energy, which is concerned about carbon emissions and has members in Los Banos. They must drive far for meetings and need a way to participate remotely. The bill allows multi-jurisdictional agencies and appointed boards to meet remotely if a majority are present in

person. The Air Quality Management District has 51 meetings a year, which are difficult to attend in person. Using Zoom during the pandemic, they saw public participation increase from 30 to 50 meetings.

Question 2: In California, we are already experiencing the effects of climate change related to increased air pollution and prolonged and extreme heat events. The Governor's Office of Planning and Research's announcement this week that it will be providing \$20 million in funding for Extreme Heat and Community Resilience Programs is good news. What kind of legislation would you support to mitigate the health effects of air pollution and extreme heat resulting from climate change?

Sen. Becker: I'm on the budget committee and working with energy groups on extreme heat. I'm trying to reduce emissions to get to net zero as soon as possible and remove emissions. Under my bill, California is leading the country on carbon removal. It's a big lift. Polluters pay. Many parts of the state will be uninhabitable for months during the year. I voted for \$460 million for equitable building decarbonization and heat pumps. Heat pumps provide heat and air conditioning. Extreme heat is a priority of mine, as is environmental justice. We must focus on every area of decarbonization of the grid. In my first session (2021), we passed [SB 596](#) on decarbonizing the industrial cement sector to achieve a 40% reduction in CO2 levels by 2035 and net zero by 2045. I introduced SB 308, requiring the CARB to establish market-based declining emission levels for different sources. The bill passed the Senate and is held in the Assembly. We're still announcing climate bills for this year. SB 993 deals with new rates for green hydrogen producers and the "over the fence" rule where third rail utilities are prevented from selling their electricity. We will be trying to make existing laws work. Our goal for the AQMDs will be to phase out gas water heaters and replace them with heat pump water heaters. We must focus on four areas to produce more renewables: methane gas build-up and the transportation, industrial, and agricultural sectors.

Question: Housing underproduction is a significant problem in California. Each community has its approach that balances the community's needs with the public at large. What approach would you take to fix the underproduction problem?

Sen. Becker: I recently met with housing developers and cities to discuss this. Cities have undergone significant rezoning: San Carlos, Millbrae, and Palo Alto have all rezoned significant portions or critical areas of the cities. Streamlining approvals has been done. The developers told me nothing is getting built because of a lack of financing. That's what we need to work on. We did look at a new redevelopment scheme, and the state has a housing

bond measure on the November ballot. The Governor is focused on a behavioral health housing bond. I'm focusing on the Bay Area Housing Finance Agency (BAHFA) bond next week at the budget committee. It calls for \$10-20 billion for Bay Area housing. I expect to champion that. A federal bill passed last night, and there was some housing financing available. We will need creative financing at the county level. I'm impressed with Montgomery County, Maryland. It builds affordable housing using a \$50 million housing production fund, which receives 5% back on the loan amount. I intend to do a housing bill every year, including funding, so interim modular units can be built quickly. We will need a massive suite of financing bills. We haven't seen a lot of state money so far. We need \$3 billion for shovel-ready affordable housing developments.

Question 4: What are the legislature's priorities and your personal priorities?

Sen. Becker: We should be dealing with the larger budget deficit. We should look at what commercial entities are paying in property tax. We'll use a large chunk of the state reserves. We will cut and delay programs. My priorities are economic opportunity, early childhood education, including transitional kindergarten, increasing pay for the early childhood workforce, and retirement funds for them. I'll probably have a bill for health care for early childhood educators. Climate change is a priority. Privacy is a priority. AI will be a priority. I'm proud that the Delete Act (SB 362) requires data brokers to allow consumers to request the deletion of any of their personal information collected by the data broker. AI is a priority. Currently, data brokers give AI scammers personal information. The Delete Act will help prevent that. There is a lot of work to do on AI. You can create an artificial conversation to scam people with two seconds of audio.

I'm working on a bill to let consumers determine if a message is created by AI when they see it. It's a big topic. Keeping funding for k-12 education, as well as UCs and community colleges, is a priority. More California kids are attending UCs than ever before. I support Open Educational Resources as described by Hal Plotkin to make access to educational resources equitable and affordable. Wildfire insurance, focus on water and agriculture, homelessness, and criminal justice reform will continue to be priorities. We also need to address high retail theft and accountability. We need to close more prisons. It costs \$130,000/year to house one prisoner. My police radio bill requiring an alternative to full encryption failed, but Palo Alto did change its policy.

Question 5: LWVC is against Prop. 1, which funds behavioral health treatment and housing for people with serious mental or substance abuse issues, because it takes money away from existing county community health programs and allows locked facilities. Please share your thoughts on Prop. 1.

Sen. Becker: Prop. 1 removes 25% of the Millionaire's tax, which currently funds county community mental health services. They will receive \$140 million/year less. Counties do good work, but are they spending it wisely? Youth mental health is a priority for me. I'd like to see more adult counselors in our schools. 25-40% of homeless have serious mental health issues. And many with mental health issues have addictions. There were over 800 deaths on the streets of San Francisco this year—more than during the pandemic. We don't have enough beds for them. We can try to cover mental health funding for county services with other sources besides the Millionaire's tax. Using 25% of current funds and passing a bond measure could get us to 10,000 units of needed housing. It's a tradeoff. Worth doing. It's a facilities bill, not a treatment bill. There is no question we need more facilities. We're trying to find a balance using Care Court for schizophrenia. You can't force treatment through Care Court. The definition of "gravely disabled" for conservatorship has been expanded to include the inability to provide necessary medical care or shelter. If you have a child who needs care, once they turn 18, stop and end up on the streets, there's nothing you can do. No professional I've talked to says more beds is a bad idea. Of course, we'll have to look at implementation and adjust it if necessary. The bond is silent on involuntary treatment. It's about more beds for treatment. I can send you materials on this issue which were provided to me. Apparently, there are some good facilities in Santa Clara County. There are licensed and unlicensed facilities. The difference seems to be whether they can dispense medications or not. There are some terrible facilities. I've heard personal stories. We need more support for mental health treatment.

Reflecting on last year, I'm more optimistic and committed to the California dream of opportunity and innovation, including policy innovation. Let people be who they want to be. Last year, we did big things: We enacted minimum wage increases for fast food workers to \$20/hr. This year, we increased the minimum wage for the health care workforce to \$25/hr, equaling \$55,000 per year. I will keep working on issues that let people live here, especially focusing on affordable housing.