

INTERVIEW WITH GUBERNATORIAL CANDIDATE, AUDITOR GENERAL JACK WAGNER

By Matt Hess

Before taking office as Auditor General six years ago, Jack Wagner represented Allegheny County in the State Senate for over 10 years. Wagner is a combat veteran of the U.S. Marine Corps, where he received the Purple Heart and numerous other military commendations for his infantry service during the Vietnam War. Wagner is a lifelong resident of Pittsburgh, where he lives with Nancy, his wife of 26 years, and their two children Luke and Sara. PLS recently sat down with him to discuss his gubernatorial campaign.

What prompted you to run for governor?

I've decided to run for governor because I believe Pennsylvania state government is not performing the way it needs to in the best interest of the taxpayers. I believe it needs to be reformed in many ways; I believe it needs to be more responsive to the needs of the citizens.

As Auditor General, we've looked at thousands of different programs where taxpayer dollars are spent and made thousands of recommendations on how to improve it. We do 5,000 audits of year and have 25,000 in my five years as Auditor General. We've identified many areas that have been reformed as a result of our audits and many areas that continue to need to be reformed. PHEAA for example, our audit changed the culture of PHEAA, changed the management of PHEAA. It eliminated extravagant spending, eliminated bonuses being paid especially top management who were receiving bonuses in excess of \$100,000. Megan's Law, as another example, where the law was actually changed by the General Assembly to require the state police to enhance the website to provide more information to families to better protect their children and women from sexually violent predators. Our audits of procurement or contracting; we've uncovered that there's insufficient competition in many of the bids of state government. Greater competition can reduce the costs of these bids, it can create more innovation, and it can bring in smaller companies that provide quality employment to Pennsylvanians. I firmly believe that state government can do a far better job.

We also need structural reform. Structural reform related to the constitution. I was an advocate as a state senator for reducing the size of the General Assembly by one-third ten years ago. The General Assembly must do a better job of setting an example of reform in state government. We need campaign finance reform. There are too many people that make \$50,000, \$100,000, \$250,000 campaign donations whether it be an individual or a PAC and it has negatively influenced state government. Our redistricting process needs to be [conducted] in a more nonpartisan way. Harrisburg has been paralyzed by partisan politics, some of these structural changes are necessary. Running for government, the first priority has to be to reform this government.

Other areas are great importance also. Having a vision for Pennsylvania; having a vision for how to improve state government from a leadership point of view. How we maximize our potential to create jobs in Pennsylvania, we have a magnificent opportunity to make Pennsylvania an energy leader. Certainly in alternative and renewable energy resources but much, much more based on our resources. We have a tremendous abundance of coal, and Marcellus Shale. It represents a magnificent opportunity for us to reduce the price of natural gas and make it more available as a clean energy. We have the capability to get it in an environmentally sensitive way; we have to the capability to make sure the environment is not harmed. We have water resources second to no other state. We need to maximize these energy resources to make Pennsylvania an energy leader; in the process we can create literally hundreds of thousands of new jobs for Pennsylvanians.

Another magnificent opportunity is to improve our infrastructure. We have been rated a D by the American Society of Civil Engineers in terms of infrastructure. We have not done a good job to enhance it. We are the Keystone State, the state that sits at the crossroads of North, South, East and West in America. Investing in our infrastructure will help our economy dramatically. It helps companies that want to locate warehousing facilities here; it gives them better access to markets. Our rail lines have not been enhanced the way they need to. It took seven and half hours when you get on a train and travel from

Pittsburgh to Philadelphia 100 years ago; today it takes seven and half hours. We should be able to move people and products in a much more cost effective way by rail in Pennsylvania. Our highway system, certain bottle necks have existed for 40 and 50 years. There needs to be a vision for how to invest in infrastructure in Pennsylvania. It will create jobs for Pennsylvanians, you can't outsource infrastructure jobs. I am not content to wait for the federal government to get this economy moving. It takes the vision of a new governor, the direction of a new governor to make it happen.

If elected, do you believe that your administration would be bogged down by the pension issue and other challenges facing the state?

The pension issue is no doubt a challenge facing the next governor. I plan on putting together a blue ribbon committee and put all the ideas on the table as to how we resolve this crisis. There is a requirement that the state meet its obligations to present and past employees both state and school district.

Keep in mind there's a big challenge at the local level on pension plans because many of those pension plans are failing also. I'm a strong proponent of consolidation of governments at the local level, to create incentives for that to happen. The same with school districts, to reduce overall administrative costs, to make governments perform better, to function better, and to serve the public better.

How does this differ from your other statewide campaigns?

I've won two statewide elections. In 2008 I received the second highest number of votes of any candidate in the history of Pennsylvania. I believe we got so many votes because we've done a great job as Auditor General. I also received more votes than any has ever received for Auditor General in the history of Pennsylvania and there's been some darn good Auditor Generals. Senator Bob Casey, Governor Bob Casey, and Barbara Hafer were all Auditor Generals. We received more votes than all of those candidates because we've taken this office to a new level. To win in Pennsylvania you must have broad based support throughout the state; we won over 40 counties in our election. Our message has been sound: one of fiscal responsibility in state government, being concerned about the average taxpayer and their pocketbook, how to reduce the cost of state government and how to make it run more efficiently. As Auditor General, we have been at the forefront of making recommendations in how to do that in state government.

What do you make of the Democratic state committee? You got the majority of votes but not the party's endorsement.

I'm very proud of the fact that on two consecutive votes we got the majority of the votes. In getting the majority of the votes, we got counties that the average person believes Democrats can't win in. We got the unanimous support of over thirty counties in that endorsement process. It says a lot about the belief of those people and me and my candidacy; the fact that they believe that I can win in November. This is not going to be an easy race as everyone knows especially what we've seen happen in the governor's race in New Jersey, the governor's race in Virginia, and the U.S. Senate race in Massachusetts. I believe the state committee people know that they need a proven vote getter that can win in November that can win in rural, suburban and urban Pennsylvania. I have broad-based support and appeal to the average, moderate Pennsylvania.

What do you make of the fundraising difference between you and Onorato?

Many people have talked about fundraising and want to make that the issue in the campaign. I believe the average citizen wants to see who can spend money in a very economic way and that's the way they will run this government. Certainly what fundraising does is that it permits you to buy advertisements. This is more about a grassroots appeal to the average person and what your ideas are as to how to restructure this government and to challenge this government. The train is off the track, and I have a track record of challenging government. They don't want a nominee that is the same old thing in government, the same old way of looking at and approaching government. There are serious problems in Pennsylvania.

Allegheny County lost over 20,000 jobs in 2009, Philadelphia lost even more. People are hurting. The public understands the challenges facing us and they want someone talking about real solutions first and foremost on how to reform the government to make it more sensitive to their needs.

You mentioned bipartisanship earlier and one of the budget sticking points has been education funding. If elected, would you continue with the Costing Out Study?

We face significant financial challenges going forward and I will do everything in my power to fund education properly including the Costing Out Study. What is most important is making smart investments in education, in other words, spending public monies where we know it has a direct positive impact on the outcome of our students and the performance of our students. It is absolutely proven that an investment in early childhood education is the right thing to do.

I am committed, as the next governor, to invest to a greater degree in early education because it helps our children better perform in the early years of the educational process and keeps them engaged in the educational process and reduces the potential significantly of them dropping out of school. I want to make sure that early childhood education gets the proper funding going forward. I've also proposed the HOPE scholarship program for higher education, a program that was initiated 20 years ago in Georgia and has caught on in 20 different states. HOPE stands for Helping Our Pupils Excel, which is helping them get the tuition that they need to go to school at the state system, the state-relateds, the private colleges and universities. HOPE provides a basic amount of money towards tuition, equal to that of the State System of Higher Education but can be applied to any school in Pennsylvania. It must be a Pennsylvania student going to a Pennsylvania school. We presently have young people in Pennsylvania leaving Pennsylvania going to school in adjoining states and elsewhere cheaper than they can go to school here. We have to change that. I would propose as soon as we get out of this recession that we [take] the monies from table games and put it into a HOPE scholarship program. I am about investing more in education but I want to do it in a smart way where there is definitely a return in investment.

What was the last book you read?

Team of Rivals by Doris Kearns Goodwin. It was an excellent book written about Abraham Lincoln and how he picked his cabinet and how he continually consulted with his cabinet on a number of critical issues most importantly the Civil War and how to run the government. In the process, he brought in secretaries that were both Republican and Democrat. His cabinet meetings were very engaging meetings where there were fiery discussions between the various secretaries offering their opinions, something that I think this government and any government desperately needs. *Team of Rivals* is a magnificent book that I believe any elected official can gain a lot [from] by reading and understanding what the president went through at one of the most significant times in our history.

Would you be open to having Republicans serve in your cabinet?

Absolutely and independents.

What was the last movie you saw?

I went with my daughter about a month ago to the Omnimax Theater in Pittsburgh to see *Mysteries of the Great Lakes*. It was a fascinating educational piece about the importance of our Great Lakes to our country and to the world. The importance of the lakes as a waterway for the movement of cargo but more importantly the ecological value of them and the importance of the fish and the wildlife associated with it.

Do you have any pets?

We have two dogs. One is a white part Siberian husky, part German Shepherd. The other is black, half black lab, half greyhound.

What are some of your favorite charities?

One is Sharing and Caring Inc., which is a veteran's nonprofit group that's been around for about 25 years. It's comprised of all the veterans' organizations in western Pennsylvania. They raise monies to help hospitalized veterans. I've sponsored a golf outing for the last 25 years of which all the proceeds go to this organization and it takes a number of veterans out of VA hospitals and nursing homes for a day of enjoyment on the gateway clipper fleet. It's really their Christmas. It's really their special day of the year for entertainment, good food and a bag of prizes.

Another nonprofit I'm very involved with is Genesis, which is an adoption agency. I've actually been the chairman of the Genesis Run for Adoption for the last 15 years.

I'm also involved in several other Vietnam Veteran organizations; I've been very involved in veteran organizations because I'm a Vietnam veteran. I also serve on the Heinz History Center Board and several others over the years.

How do you see the race shaking out over the next several months and what message would you like to leave with the taxpayers of Pennsylvania?

I see the race shaping out as a race based on the importance of this government being more responsive to the needs of the public. First and foremost for it to run in a more economically responsible manner and for state government to be more sensitive in terms of what's on the average person's mind. The fact that they are hurting financially and the challenges going forward are far more difficult than they've been in the past and state government creating a vision to move us out of this recession. I believe the race itself is going to be far more grassroots than anyone thinks it will be. I don't believe TV and money will dictate the outcome. I believe it will be the basic belief of the average person of which candidate is genuine, which candidate has integrity, and which candidate is talking about the pocket book issues that they're concerned about.

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