OMAR ORNELAS THE DESERT SUN

Meg Whitman, Republican candidate for governor, speaks to employees of CareFusion, a medical equipment company in Palm Springs, in April 15.

Whitman fighting for every vote in the Coachella Valley

hank plante

I had an exclusive interview with Meg Whitman this week, coming off her strong performance at the final debate with Jerry Brown and she was feeling that strength.

Whitman wanted me to know that she's been to the Coachella Valley eight times since she announced for governor and she considers the race a toss-up among voters here, as it is statewide.

"I think what I talk about every day on the trail is especially relevant to the Coachella Valley because my No. 1 priority is getting people back to work," she told me, noting that Riverside County's unemployment rate is higher than the state's.

"So where the unemployment rate is highest, people understand that a job is the only thing that is going to put the state back to work. People understand that, particularly in the Coachella Valley."

And she isn't unfamiliar with the valley's appeal, she says. "When we lived in Los Angeles, we used to come out to Palm Springs when the boys were little. We stayed at the Marriott and in La Quinta, and of course I've been to many, many conferences there in the Palm Springs area."

Whitman is familiar with the area's appeal

As for the race itself, she acknowledges that it's tight, despite her spending $140 million of her eBay fortune on her campaign.

The most recent polls, averaged together, show Brown ahead in the race by about 5 points, but that's well within the margin-of-error for most polls. And those polls were taken before the most recent controversy in the race, the use of the word "whore" by a Jerry Brown staffer who was describing Whitman. (Brown apologized for that remark again at this past week's debate.)

But the apology wasn't enough for Whitman.

"I was stunned by how insensitive he was to that remark," Whitman told me, "and he didn't seem to get it. But I think we've got to get this campaign back to the issues that we care about."

"But what didn't he 'get,'?" I asked.

She answered, "I think most Californians are tired of the slurs and personal attacks coming out of the Brown campaign. Most Californians, and especially most women, understand what is going here and everyone will make their own judgments, they know what they think about this."

I also asked about her own diversion as well: the controversy over her employing an illegal immigrant housekeeper, then firing her after her immigration status became known. I wondered if Whitman would have handled that any differently?

"I can't think of anything I would have done differently," she told me. "The truth is that Nicky (the housekeeper) forged documents. She went to an agency with forged documents. I think I handled it as well as it can possibly be handled. I think most Californians understand this is a political stunt … that the Brown campaign was talking about this two weeks previously, and the SEIU (labor union) had an ad ready to go."

Whitman has backing of public safety unions

Speaking of unions, Whitman has portrayed Jerry Brown as being "in the pocket" of the big state employees' unions, but it was Whitman herself who exempted police and fire union members from her pension reform plan.

(Her reform plan would shift most new state employees out of pensions and into a 401(k) plan, but police and fire workers would would be exempt and still get pensions).

Not only did that help Whitman get the endorsement of the California State Law Enforcement Association, but the group also pumped another $800,000 into her campaign this past week.

Whitman, however, says there's no connection between the endorsement and her position.

"For Jerry Brown to assert that that's why they endorsed me, it's not. It's because they know I'm going to be tougher on crime, and he's not." (Brown disputes that, citing his enforcement of the death penalty as evidence of his toughness on crime.)

Brown has not agreed to an interview, yet

Brown, incidentally, has not yet responded to my request to do a similar interview for The Desert Sun. He had been avoiding reporters since the controversy over the Whitman slur, and he only started taking press questions again toward the end of this past week.

As for Whitman, when I talked with her she had just seen the bus that she'll be traveling on during a final statewide push, stressing the same theme that she's been hitting since I first interviewed her, when she announced in February of 2009:

"My business is creating jobs, his business is politics … if Jerry Brown ends up being governor nothing is going to change. If I end up governor, things will change."

That's a familiar theme that's being repeated in many races across the country right now: political experience versus outside change.

But nowhere is that choice more important than right here in the biggest state.

Hank Plante is an Emmy Award-winning political reporter who has covered California politics for three decades for TV stations in San Francisco and Los Angeles. E-mail him at hankplante1@gmail.com

Race for governor may go down to the wire

The website "Real Clear Politics" lists the California governor's race as "Leans Dem," based on polling trends.

And that makes sense, but with a few caveats, says San Francisco State political scientist Joe Tuman, who has authored several books on politics.

Tuman freeze frames the race this way:

"I think that given the amount and sheer volume of advertising that's been put into this race already, I think people have already been exposed to enough information that they've picked sides on this."

Given that, Tuman says, don't believe any polls that show large numbers of undecided voters.

"Usually at this time of the year we're fighting over undecideds, and I think for the governor's race people have kind of picked sides on this already. And the result is that if these poll numbers are accurate, it's a slight edge for Brown but within the margin of error. Enough so that he should not feel comfortable at this point."

So what must each candidate do to close the deal with voters? Tuman says Whitman must continue to exploit the anti-incumbency mood in the country.

"Whitman's effectiveness in this has to be that she has to paint him as an incumbent. So the way going forward for her is to continue to remind voters that he is businesses as usual and while he may not be an incumbent governor, he is, symbolically, the de facto equivalent. If she presses that, if the race is close enough, she can win."

Brown, on the other hand, must stress his experience, according to the professor.

"It's less about selling her as inexperienced, and more about him being experienced enough that you can trust him; but enough of a free thinker and creative thinker that he doesn't come across as a typical incumbent. If he effectively makes that case he'll win this race. It'll be close, but he'll win."

— HANK PLANTE

VALLEYVOICE

Economic partnership powers innovation, re-energizes region

fred bell

As tough as recent times have been for the country in general and the Coachella Valley in particular, our region is poised for resurgence. Coachella Valley Economic Partnership (CVEP), through its Economic Blueprint, is actively implementing a strategic plan that includes high-value job creation and greater long-term sustainability. The organization will highlight the valley's progress this Friday at its annual Economic Summit in Indian Wells.

Maximizing our natural resources is a key driver of CVEP's effective marshaling and interlinking of local government, educational institutions and businesses. The Coachella and Imperial valleys serve as a natural "generator" of multiple renewable energy forms, with unparalleled potential in solar radiation, geothermal and biomass. These opportunities, coupled with abundant land, lower development costs and motivated governing bodies, comprise an important part of our economic recovery.

Coachella Valley Economic Summit

When: 7:30 a.m., with the presentation from 8:30 a.m. to noon Friday.

Where: Renaissance Esmeralda Resort & Spa, Indian Wells.

Speakers: Economist John Husing and Todd Buchholz, former White House director of economic policy

Theme: "Climate for Success"

Tickets: $75 for a CVEP investor; $95 for a future investor.

More information: (760) 340-1575, www.cvep.com

Noble Renewables builds a better turbine

Noble Renewables, a Palm Desert-based joint venture, symbolizes what is possible when those attributes are strategically aligned. Created in 2009 by brothers Tom and Fred Noble, the company combines the former's commercial industrial development knowledge with the latter's three decades of renewable energy development experience. They are delivering on the promise of tomorrow today.

The company is in the final stages of developing a new prototype 95-kilowatt wind turbine to re-power some of the holdings of Wintec, its joint utility partner, which has been selling energy on the grid for more than 30 years. This turbine will be about 30 percent more efficient than the existing 25-year-old model. The assembly of these new turbines will take place in Palm Desert, producing critically needed jobs for the valley and stimulating investment in the region.

Meanwhile, in the solar power realm, Noble Renewables will soon announce a 300-kilowatt system to be built on a prominent Coachella Valley school campus. One of largest private solar systems in the valley to date, the system will begin generating power no later than the first quarter of 2011. Also, the company has about four megawatts of solar for private users in various stages of development and about five megawatts being developed on ground leases with other solar integrators.

Learn more on third Thursday of the month

One can learn more about these and other exciting developments in CVEP's Renewable Energy Roundtable, which is held on the third Thursday of every month at the UCR Palm Desert Graduate Center. The Roundtable brings together interested parties from across the renewable business spectrum to trade leads and discuss the way forward for this emerging industry. Noble Renewables remains a committed partner with CVEP on the Roundtable, recognizing the value and benefits of bringing together the region's diverse stakeholder base. It serves as a good example of how public/private partnerships can work to produce incremental economic value for a region.

The company's support of CVEP and the Economic Summit centers on a strong belief that the event is, and should be, a focal point for the dialogue and economic development that are critical to lifting our region. It is incumbent upon our business leaders to strive for the Blueprint's success. The economic vitality of the Coachella Valley depends on it.

Fred Bell is chief operating officer of Noble & Company, LLC. He can be reached at fredbell@noblecompanyllc.com.

SHAREYOUR**VIEWS**

The Desert Sun welcomes guest columns addressing local political and social issues.

General guidelines include:

- Columns should be 500 to 550 words.
- We print the author's photo and contact info (typically an e-mail address) with the column.
- Anonymous columns are never published.
- Stick to a single topic and avoid personal attacks.
- We reserve the right to edit and republish (including electronically) all columns.

Direct column submissions and questions to: **James Folmer, community conversations editor, at james.folmer@thedesertsun.com**

MYDESERTPOLL

Today's question

Do you feel California could do more to ensure trucks meet all safety mandates before getting on the highways? **To vote, go to mydesert.com/opinion**.

Saturday's poll results

254 votes cast as of 5 p.m.

Would you buy an electric car if you could?

44.5% ..... **Yes**

55.5% ..... **No**

Teen journalists: We can help kick start your careers

rick green
executive editor

Thirty years ago this month, I scored my first byline in my hometown newspaper back in Ohio, The Coshocton Tribune.

I was a 15-year-old high school sophomore who responded to a call from editors seeking local student writers.

Because I always loved to write and was editor of my junior high newspaper, I jumped at the chance to write stories about my high school.

I never imagined that first byline would launch a career that has brought me to this beautiful corner of California as executive editor.

My first foray into that tiny newsroom on Main Street — with the smell of ink and paper, the clanging of typewriters and the clacking of an Associated Press teletype machine in the corner — is fresh in my memory.

Even more important were the relationships an eager, curious 15-year-old forged with Tribune editors and reporters, who became friends and mentors.

I still talk to several of them.

Thirty years later, I want to offer that same experience to aspiring Coachella Valley teen journalists.

As we've done the past two years, The Desert Sun wants to publish the work produced by high school writers, photographers and multimedia wizards.

You'll get the chance to write for our community weeklies, morning edition and mydesert.com.

Like to shoot video?

Want to write about news in your city or school?

Love to snap pictures and eager to share them?

Want to see how we create your Desert Sun?

Twice a day, at 9:30 a.m. and again at 2:45 p.m., our editors gather to discuss the next morning's edition of The Desert Sun, as well as content changes to mydesert.com. It is typically an engaging give-and-take about the day's biggest stories and how we can accomplish our mission of being an essential provider of local news you'll find nowhere else. This is when our Page One and other sections take shape.

Want to see how we do it?

Drop me an e-mail at rick.green@thedesertsun.com or call (760) 778-4637 and we will invite you to one of our meetings.

If you're a student at one of the valley's local schools, call or e-mail me and we'll discuss the opportunities to display those skills with our readers.

You also will meet our news team that will help elevate your skills.

Who knows? It could be the first step in an incredible 30-year career that, hopefully, stretches at least another couple of decades.

Thanks, as always, for reading The Desert Sun and mydesert.com.

Rick Green is executive editor of The Desert Sun and mydesert.com. E-mail him at rick.green@thedesertsun.com, or call (760) 778-4637.