

## Political campaign work

By Steve Montgomery

Scott McVarish had never been a candidate for political office before this summer, but he has been involved in political campaigns and in a union.

How that experience will affect the faculty, families and students of the Culver City Unified School District Board of Education may be a question that might not be answered until election day.

From 1997 until 2007, McVarish, a former president of United Parents of Culver City, was a member of the Teachers Assn. of Long Beach and served as its executive director beginning in 2001. According to the Long Beach Press-Telegram, he was fired by the union in 2007 under a cloud of controversy emanating from alle-

gations of mismanagement of union finances—a charge that he denies.

The union later reinstated him but shortly thereafter McVarish resigned, according to the Press Telegram.

According to McVarish's account, what happened in Long Beach was the result of "internal union politics" and there was no financial mismanagement. A new board of directors took over in 2006 and soon an internecine battle began. "I found and the new board found that we were no longer in sync, so I stepped down. It was completely amicable. We had different visions," McVarish said.

But according to someone who says she worked closely with McVarish during that

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time, union politics was only a part of why McVarish and the board parted ways and not necessarily amicably.

Eileen Fetters was the assistant executive director under McVarish until she resigned in 2006. She characterized the first few years working with McVarish as "fairly smooth" until 2006.

"There was a lot of turmoil and conflict" under McVarish's leadership, said Fetters, a retired teacher in Orange County. "He was a very polarizing person and he was highly controversial."

An audit during McVarish's tenure was conducted after California Teachers Assn. took over the union due to infighting between a group supportive of McVarish and another that wanted to oust him. In 2008, the Press-Telegram released the results of the audit by Hemming Morse Inc. While the audit did not uncover any financial improprieties, the auditors

faulted the union for "poor internal controls, financial oversight and record-keeping" that led to "many errors and suspected irregularities."

The audit uncovered that McVarish signed more than \$600,000 in teacher association checks for union expenses in violation of the terms of his employment agreement and the policy set by the union's board of directors.

In his race for a seat on the Culver City Unified School District Board of Education this year, McVarish has cast himself and his slate partner Ann Burke as the candidates most capable of managing and allocating \$160 million in school district facility repairs.

McVarish said he had to write checks in Long Beach in order to keep the office going because the treasurer at the time refused to issue or sign any checks. "It wasn't my role but because [the treasurer] was refusing, I did in order to keep things afloat," he explained.

"We had an accountant and a bookkeeper who had been there for almost 20 years:

We had a treasurer who was elected. If there were problems with the way checks were routed, certainly I might have stepped in and hired people but there was never any complaints until the very end," he added. "And it was only after the new board stepped in and tried to fire me that they made complaints and they were made to justify the firing. It was all understandable, internal union politics."

Fetters, who was also included in the audit, did not recollect the check signing question the same way as McVarish did. "I don't recall that the treasurer ever refused to sign checks. I do remember that she had some questions over certain expenditures that she might not have wanted to sign," recalled Fetters, who learned that McVarish was seeking public office via Facebook.

One of the turning points that spurred the discord between McVarish and a faction of the union was a school board race where McVarish was very active, Fetters said. "He ran a very aggressive and expensive

campaign that wasn't entirely successful and that raised questions about how the money was being spent," she stated.

The auditors could not account for over \$44,000 in expenditures and more than half—23,600—were on a credit card used by McVarish.

According to the audit, McVarish told the auditors that various union employees used his card and he did not keep track of documenting expenses used by others.

Former California Teachers Assn. President Barbara Kerr told the Press-Telegram that the audit did not find that McVarish has committed any intentional misconduct or criminal acts. But it did reveal "egregious mismanagement" and the buck stops at his door.

"The executive director is responsible for overseeing the finances and the staff. That's part of their job," Kerr told the newspaper. "But there was no intentional action."

McVarish did have his supporters in Long Beach. Bob Joplin, a former member of the union said McVarish "turned us

into a union and every teacher in the union, whether they like him or not, has benefitted from his leadership."

"I had 10 great years and I'm very proud of my time there. When you have a popular union leader and you want to get rid of him, you have to say why, so they threw some mud on the wall. But none of it stuck," McVarish said.

Fetters said she got along well with McVarish. "We had a very professional relationship," she said. "I have no axe to grind."

She also has a different opinion about McVarish's claim that what happened in Long Beach was a function of internal union politics.

"To a certain extent that's true. Unions do have internal struggles from time to time but not usually in teachers unions," said Fetters, who has been involved with unions for several years. "But I believe—whether he intended to or not—that Scott was the reason why the union became divided."