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L.A.-area legislator never forgets the elephants

By Carla Hall
Times Staff Writer

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State Assemblyman Lloyd Levine is not a vegetarian, is allergic to cats and doesn't own a dog. (He does, however, admit to a "family of dust bunnies" under his bed.)

This year, the only legislation that has come close to making him famous — both "Good Morning, America" and "The Colbert Report" took notice — is not about protecting animals. It's about banning the sale of incandescent lightbulbs. (Levine dubbed it the "How Many Legislators Does It Take to Change a Light Bulb Act.")

Yet the 37-year-old Democrat from Van Nuys has become something of an elephant point man in the California Legislature.

Last year, he introduced a bill that would have mandated a minimum of five acres of outdoor space for zoo elephants, a requirement that no zoo in the state except Oakland's had met or had plans to meet. Even the Los Angeles Zoo's sweeping \$39-million planned pachyderm exhibit, now under construction, does not offer that much enclosure space. The bill never made it out of the appropriations committee.

This year, Levine has retooled his proposal. Instead of mandatory space requirements, zoos must offer enrichment activities and see that their elephants, creatures known to roam miles in the wild, walk an average of five miles a day. The bill, which Levine introduced Feb. 22, also outlaws the use of the bull hook and other instruments.

"I've said this about elephants repeatedly — nobody has an inherent right to see an elephant in the zoo. Nobody has an inherent right to see any animal in the zoo," said Levine, who is wading into the national controversy over whether zoos are humanely keeping elephants. "It's a privilege, and with the privilege of seeing an animal in the zoo comes the responsibility of providing it care that's appropriate."

There's more animal welfare on Levine's agenda. On Feb. 23 he introduced a bill — co-authored by Sen. Alex Padilla (D-Pacoima) and Assemblyman Pedro Nava (D-Santa Barbara) and backed by Los Angeles Mayor Antonio Villaraigosa — that has the potential to affect every dog and cat owner in California. In an effort to stem the euthanasia of hundreds of thousands of unwanted shelter animals — many the offspring of unaltered pets — the measure would make neutering and spaying of pets in the state mandatory. (Certain owners can apply for exemptions.)

Why did the chair of the Assembly Committee on Utilities and Commerce become such an animal advocate?

"My parents just taught me an appreciation for animals," Levine said.

But the real religion at home in the San Fernando Valley was politics, not animal rights. The son of political consultant Larry Levine, the assemblyman saw the inside of his first campaign headquarters at age 4.

And that may be why Levine, whether he's talking elephants or house pets — or the energy-wasting of incandescent lightbulbs — seems to know where to draw the line.

"I'm not an extreme animal legislator," said Levine, now in his third term in the Assembly and planning a run for the Senate.

In general, animal bills can set up legislators for a tough ride. "You get labeled, you get seen as a little different," said Democratic state Sen. Alan Lowenthal of Long Beach, who last year had success with a bill that outlawed prolonged tethering of dogs — but not before legislators greeted him with barks. Lowenthal said Levine seems to have escaped the labeling. "Lloyd has a broad range of issues that he's interested in."

Levine has written several energy bills this year and co-authored a high-profile measure on assisted suicide.

"I don't go out on wild goose chases — pardon the bad pun there," said Levine, who prides himself on his research. "Even if you don't 100% agree with me, you can't say that I don't have any facts to support me."

But he doesn't convince everyone.

"Obviously we want to make sure animals are treated fairly," said Assemblyman Rick Keene (R-Chico). "But I don't see a crying need to get involved in how zoos manage their animals. I haven't heard anyone say the most pressing problem in the state is that we don't walk elephants five miles a day."

Keene works with Levine on the Utilities and Commerce Committee. "I like to tease him," he said, adding that they are friends — if not legislative soul mates. "I don't think the state of California should tell people to spay and neuter their animals when they know they should."

Levine says he's game for the political teasing: "If you're willing to joke about yourself, you actually increase your credibility."

Zoo visit

As he strolled through the Los Angeles Zoo recently, Levine said he still believes in the educational significance of zoos but not in their ability to keep elephants. In particular, he thinks the L.A. Zoo should send both its female African elephant, Ruby — currently kept off-exhibit alone — and its only on-display pachyderm, Billy, an Asian bull, to a sanctuary.

At the elephant exhibit, he eyed Billy. "Look at what he's doing. He's just standing there. That's not natural behavior for an elephant. He's got nothing else to do."

The zoo was thronged the day of Levine's visit, and a few visitors eyed him curiously — a tall, lean man in a gray suit (he had just come from a television interview) on a near 90-degree February day, speaking intensely about elephants. Oblivious to the stares, Levine was reminiscent of a young Jimmy Stewart, in a Mr. Levine-Goes-to-the-Zoo kind of way.

"That's not a happy elephant," he continued. "I mean, would you be happy if you were kept all day in something that [size] and could never leave?"

This kind of talk earns him kudos from animal welfare activists and a rebuttal from the Los Angeles Zoo.

"He's looking at his perception of those conditions, but what he's not looking at is how these animals are doing," zoo director John Lewis said. "Ruby is doing well. The behavior people focus on with Billy is behavior he's exhibited since he was young. He came to us with that behavior."

Generally, Levine is politic. Of Lewis, he said, "I think he's got the elephants' best interests at heart, but I also think he's pulled in a lot of different directions."

"We are willing to work with him," Lewis said. "We just want to make sure that what's done isn't redundant and open to a variety of interpretations."

Levine has schooled himself on the esoterica of elephants in captivity and can hold forth intelligently on ground substrate, watering holes and whether keepers have "protected" or "free" contact with the elephants.

He has visited every zoo in the state except two, and he's toured the Performing Animal Welfare Society's Central California elephant sanctuary.

Zoo officials maintain that vast space is not necessary for captive elephants because they only roam in the wild for food and shelter. Levine says they need the space to roam for exercise — along with the behavior enrichment activities that encourage them to use the acreage.

Two years ago, a conversation with Detroit Zoo director Ron Kagan — whose facility gave up pachyderms — raised Levine's elephant consciousness. But it was his stint working 10 years ago for then-Democratic Assemblyman Edward Vincent (now a state senator representing Inglewood) that inspired him to meld politics and animals.

"He wanted to do something about the pet overpopulation problem," said Levine. "That's what really renewed my political interest."

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