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When the holiday ends, the political strife begins

By DEREK HARPER, Statehouse Bureau, 609-292-4935 | Posted: Monday, September 7, 2009 |

TRENTON - Labor Day is the traditional start of the campaign season, simultaneously the beginning of both the so-called "silly season" and when political campaigns are expected to settle down and get serious.

And because one of the most contested races will again take place in the region, area residents can expect an even more heightened campaign season this fall.

Labor Day is when the television ads, public appearances and news releases kick into higher gear, said Sharon Schulman, director of the William J. Hughes Center for Public Policy at The Richard Stockton College of New Jersey.

The electorate gets frustrated at about this time, too, she said, as it is blanketed by campaign ads.

Statewide, Gov. Jon S. Corzine, a Democrat, has spent much of the summer slugging it out with his Republican challenger, Chris Christie.

The Corzine camp raised questions about Christie's ethics throughout the summer, criticizing him in ads, statements and through surrogates about contracts to allies while he was U.S. Attorney, conversations with leading national and state Republicans while still in office and his driving record.

At the same time, Christie and surrogates, including the Republican Governors Association, fired back with charges that Corzine has mishandled the state while in office, placing the blame for the recession at his feet.

But polls released Sept. 1 showed the skirmishing had little effect. One by Fairleigh Dickinson University staked Christie to a 5-percentage-point lead, while one released by Quinnipiac University put Christie's lead at 10 points - both had changed little from earlier polls.

At a campaign stop in Atlantic City, Christie said he spent \$500,000 over the summer but was happy to still be leading in the polls despite being significantly outspent by Corzine through the

summer.

Christie said the campaign had been saving most of its funds for the final months of the campaign. He will roll out another television commercial Tuesday and expected to do television marketing every day until the election.

The Corzine camp will continue to raise questions about Christie's ethics, Corzine spokesman Sean Darcy said, saying that as more state residents get to know him, they have reservations.

But the race will hinge on economics, Darcy said.

"At the end of the day, this election is going to come down to who is best prepared to lead New Jersey's economy through the national recession," Darcy said.

The third man in the race, independent Chris Daggett, said Friday he was glad that 10 percent of the state already knew who he was, according to polls.

Daggett, who has positioned himself as an alternative to both candidates, was optimistic after summertime campaigns by Corzine and Christie that he said served to "depress, discourage and disgust people."

He said attention must be paid to issues, including the looming state pension obligation, environmental concerns and education, which he discussed Friday with Stockton President Herman J. Saatkamp Jr.

"Who has the worst driving record, who is the bigger crook or liar - after a while, you just say 'enough,'" Daggett said. "Let's talk about the issues and how we are going to solve them."

With the Assembly up for election, the region also will see arguably the state's top race in Cape May County.

The state political news Web site PolitickerNJ.com recently rated the district represented by freshmen Assemblymen Matt Milam and Nelson Albano, D-Cape May, Cumberland, Atlantic, as one that "leans Republican."

It had previously been rated a tossup and is the only district in the state where the site says the political leaning clashes with the party of the incumbent.

Mark Duffy, executive director of Assembly Republican Victory '09, the coordinated campaign, said the 1st Legislative District was "the premier race" in the state and was optimistic about the chances of Republican challengers Mike Donohue and Frank Conrad.

Michael Muller, who heads the Democratic Assembly Campaign Committee, said he remains optimistic about Albano and Milam's chances, and that districtmate state Sen. Jeff Van Drew was campaigning as hard as the two of them.

Donohue and Conrad have tried to tie Albano and Milam to Corzine, but Muller said voters would make independent selections.

Staff Writer Tom Barlas contributed to this story.

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