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New Jersey's Lautenberg in no rush to yield his Senate seat

April 22, 2012 | By Joelle Farrell, Inquirer Trenton Bureau

At 88, Frank Lautenberg is the oldest member of the U.S. Senate.

But in recent weeks, the New Jersey Democrat has acted more like a young up-and-comer, jousting with Gov. Christie, swiping at state agencies, and poking holes in a university merger plan supported by powerful members of his own party.

His endgame, political observers say, is to show his vigor and his intention to run for reelection in 2014, when he will be 90.

And any Democrat planning to challenge him in a primary better watch out.

"I won't be flushed out and I won't be pushed out," Lautenberg said after a discussion at Rider University this month.

Story continues below.

In recent weeks, Lautenberg has rekindled a long-standing feud with the Republican governor, scorching a Christie appointee during a Senate subcommittee hearing Wednesday. Christie called it a "thuggish political show" and said Lautenberg's behavior was "an embarrassment to this state and an embarrassment to the United States Senate."

And it's not just Republicans lashing out at Lautenberg. South Jersey Democrats hammered him after he criticized the plan to merge Rutgers-Camden with Rowan University, a sign that they may back another candidate in 2014.

"They look at him as the cork in the bottle; he has to pop out before other people can come up," said Carl Golden, a contributing political analyst at the William J. Hughes Center for Public Policy at Richard Stockton College. "Privately, many Democrats are saying, 'Gee, look, he'll be 90; it's time now to bring in a younger new person.'"

In the latest Christie-Lautenberg skirmish, the senator took advantage of a subcommittee meeting on toll increases to lay into Christie through Bill Baroni, whom the governor appointed as deputy executive director of the Port Authority of New York and New Jersey.

Baroni gave as good as he got, leading Lautenberg to call Baroni's "impertinence . . . barely tolerable."

"Talk straight. . . . I asked you a simple question," Lautenberg said. "You have to discuss it. . . . You work for the people, whether you think so or not."

Baroni, a former Republican state senator, shot back that Lautenberg took advantage of the same perks he now cites as part of the "dysfunction" of the Port Authority. Baroni held up an E-ZPass card that Lautenberg, who was a Port Authority commissioner from 1978 until 1982, used for free bridge crossings and parking as recently as 2006, when the agency ended the benefit for former members.

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