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## Christie era likely to end on a bitter, contentious note

By Carl Golden 9 hrs ago

In the relationship between the news media and a governor, tension and conflict are two daily constants.

It cannot be otherwise. The former is engaged in mining for information while the latter is occupied with managing it. That the two should often collide is inevitable.

While the differences are usually resolved — often satisfying neither party — life goes on with each side pursuing their competing goals.

In the most recent clash between Gov. Chris Christie and the press covering his administration, though, the governor has escalated the conflict into take-no-prisoners warfare.

Angered over the state Legislature's failure to consider a proposal he supported to repeal the requirement that governments publish official notices in local newspapers, Christie lashed back via Twitter messages and his radio call-in show, calling newspaper executives "pigs at the government trough."

When the proposal was initially sprung on the Legislature in its final session days, it was quickly labeled the "Newspaper Revenge" bill, an effort by Christie to punish the news media financially for what he considered over-the-top coverage of the George Washington Bridge lane closing scandal.

Newspapers quickly mobilized with front-page editorials and personal appeals to the Legislature urging the bill's defeat, arguing it would lead to job losses and the closing of small circulation daily and weekly papers which rely heavily on the revenue.

Despite the belief that the print media, because of its ongoing economic woes, had lost its ability to influence events, it prevailed.

In the past, Christie has been contemptuous of reporters, referring to them on occasion as idiots and ridiculing their questions as stupid.

The legislative loss, though, was widely interpreted as a stinging defeat, underscoring his lame duck status, his low public standing, and the embarrassment of being overlooked by President-elect Donald Trump for a cabinet or White House staff position.

He cut the ground from beneath his own argument, however, by insisting the publication requirement cost taxpayers \$80 million, a claim for which his office offered no documentation other than referring to a vague, in-house study.

Newspaper executives placed the cost at \$20 million and said a good deal of that was actually paid by private interests.

Even the timing of the proposal fueled the revenge theory. If, for instance, the issue was as crucial to taxpayers as the Administration suggested, why did the governor wait until the seventh year in office before raising it? Furthermore, why the haste to muscle it through the Legislature in its final voting session of the year?

Christie, though, was relentless, repeating his criticism and claiming the \$80 million cost was a legitimate number. Even in defeat, his administration pledged to make the issue a top priority in 2017 on the same level of importance as rescuing the state's public pension fund — rated the worst funded in the nation — or developing a more equitable education funding formula.

The loss came even though the proposal was supported by Senate President Steve Sweeney, D-3rd of West Deptford, and Assembly Speaker Vincent Prieto, D-32nd of Secaucus, whose backing normally guarantees legislative approval.

Sweeney said government should not subsidize private industry, an odd assertion in light of the more than \$7 billion in fiscal incentives offered to corporations to convince them to remain or relocate in New Jersey.

Prieto said the savings to local governments represented property tax relief. But, with the local property tax producing more than \$20 billion a year, the impact of a \$20 million savings would be barely noticeable.

Whether the issue will be raised again in the 2017 legislative session remains to be seen. It's unlikely that a major shift in sentiment will occur in the Legislature and the newspaper industry will certainly not back off its position.

Christie has jostled with the media almost since the day he assumed office. While much of it has been jocular, there have been numerous testy exchanges revealing an underlying belief on the governor's part that he has not been treated fairly.

He has refused for more than three months to hold a news conference or respond to questions from the press corps which covers him on a daily basis. In the immediate aftermath of the guilty verdicts returned in the "Bridgewater" trial, Christie responded by sitting for an interview with a national television network personality who quickly displayed his minimal familiarity with the scandal and allowed Christie to dominate the narrative with his version of events.

The relationship, at this point, has deteriorated to a point where it's likely beyond repair and virtually guarantees that the Christie era will end on a bitter, contentious note.

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