

# Christie's lame duck budget

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(Photo: Kevin Wexler/NorthJersey.com)

Normally, the weeks and days leading up to the governor's submitting his proposed budget to a joint session of the Legislature are filled with speculation and anticipation. State House corridors buzz with rumors as the usual reliable and unreliable sources peddle insights supposedly culled from administration insiders, but which, in reality, are little more than the product of overactive imaginations.

This year is no normal year.

The oxygen has been vacuumed from the Trenton political atmosphere by the overwhelming fascination with all things Trump. The center of the universe lies some 180 miles south of the State House, where the largest bowl of political catnip in history has been set before the media.

Even an event as significant and revealing as where and on what the state intends to spend some \$33 billion in taxpayer money is outclassed by the daily whirlwind of presidential tweets and never-before-heard rhetoric from the leader of the free world.

Putting the president aside for a moment – difficult though it may be – there is interest in what Governor Christie will recommend when he delivers his message on Tuesday.

The dearth of speculation and the absence of authorized leaks from the administration in advance of the speech suggests the proposed budget will not break any new ground or include major new initiatives.

This year's legislative and gubernatorial election, coupled with Christie's lame-duck status and historically low public approval standing, indicates a stand-pat, stay-the-course spending proposal.

The Democratic legislative majorities will be understandably reluctant to hand Christie any victories, preferring to look forward to next year, confident they will enjoy unified government – clear majorities in both houses and a Democrat in the governor's office.

It is likely that the governor's speech will be part nostalgia, part self-congratulation and part dark warnings about the perils of straying from the path of fiscal prudence he's charted.

He can be expected to revisit the more than seven years that have elapsed since his inauguration (the nostalgia segment), recalling the economic wreckage he inherited, and the difficult, painful-but-necessary steps he took to restore stability.

He'll likely boast (the self-congratulation part) of his record of no tax increases (the gasoline tax hike to replenish the Transportation Trust Fund aside), along with a cap on local property tax increases, record appropriations to the beleaguered public pension system, historic levels of aid to local school districts, significant reductions in the number of public employees, the largest tax break for seniors in history with the elimination of the estate tax and doubling the exemption for pension income, and increasing spending to fight the scourge of opioid addiction.

Superstorm Sandy is never far from Christie's mind, and he'll likely recall the economic and personal devastation it dealt the state while reminding his audience that he led the way back to recovery. It's a reminder, too, that it was his finest hour and one that propelled him to a 70 percent-plus public approval rating.

He hinted at the expected dark warning part of his speech with his address to the Chamber of Commerce dinner in Washington, D.C., two weeks ago, when he told his audience of business executives and politicians to be wary of the promises being made by those who wished to succeed him.

There is no checkbook fat enough, he said, to fulfill those promises, and any attempt to do so will undo the progress he said he's made to establish and maintain a fiscally prudent government.

His definition of progress, though, will be severely challenged by Democrats who will be quick to note the record 10 downgrades of the state's credit rating, average property taxes the highest in the nation, a pension system still close to the ragged edge of insolvency, the highest home foreclosure rate in the country, and an economic recovery and job creation rate that have lagged behind neighboring states.

Any proposed new or increased spending is likely to be modest, in line with his fondness for comparing the rate of budget growth with that of his predecessors, a comparison that tilts heavily in his favor.

He may use the platform to renew his pitch for his school funding proposal to allocate an identical per-pupil amount – \$6,599 – to every school district regardless of size or economic circumstance, even though the Legislature has made it clear more than once that it's unacceptable and will not be considered.

Democrats will assume their customary loyal opposition posture, emphasizing the lack of recommendations for property tax relief and failure to meet the obligation for the state's contribution to the pension system.

In the end, however, Christie will receive from the Legislature a budget strikingly similar to the one he submitted. And, in the unlikely event he doesn't, he'll exercise his power of line item veto to bring it into line with his wishes.

Christie, of course, will only have to live with half the budget, leaving the remainder to his successor to deal with come next January. Any significant changes will be difficult, if not impossible, for the next governor to implement at that point, with six months already elapsed in the fiscal year.

The budget message remains one of two signature moments in state government (the State of the State message is the other), and this year's address will attract attention and be subjected to the kind of analysis and dissection as those that went before.

It will, however – unlike previous years – be partly overshadowed by events and developments in Washington. And, as state election campaigns unfold, they will draw increased focus.

For his part, Christie will have one more opportunity to address a joint legislative session when the next one opens six days before the gubernatorial inauguration in January.

What level of normalcy will prevail at that time or whether tweeting will continue to rule remains to be seen.

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