

Analysis: Is possible 2016 run behind Christie's tighter grip on N.J. financial info?

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Governor Christie

Governor Christie won the 2009 gubernatorial election against incumbent Jon Corzine by promising to right New Jersey's economy, fix a state budget riddled with debt and take on record-high property tax bills.

Christie would accomplish those goals while ushering in "a new era of transparency and accountability," he said during his inauguration.

But since delivering those remarks in January 2010, Christie has been forced to face several stark facts: Tax collections fell below what he promised; credit ratings were downgraded; property tax bills grew; and the state unemployment rate continued to trail the national average and those of most neighboring states.

Now, Christie has turned his attention to 2016 and a decision about joining the race for the Republican Party's presidential nomination, in which each candidate's economic record will be a critical issue. But in the past eight months, his

administration has made several moves that ultimately keep sensitive details about state finances from public view.

For example, the state Department of Treasury's decision over the summer to stop releasing monthly revenue reports that fully detail any gaps between tax collections and budget projections means the reports will no longer disclose the type of shortfalls that have beset Christie's last three budgets.

State revenue has been a tough issue for Christie, who once lashed out at the Legislature's budget expert, calling him "Dr. Kevorkian of the numbers" over a disputed forecast. And a series of monthly shortfalls also forced lawmakers to pause as Christie tried to convince them to pass an income tax cut during his first term.

A spokesman for Christie said the policy changes have nothing to do with the governor's political ambitions and the likelihood that his economic record, including the budget shortfalls, could soon be scoured for weaknesses by primary opponents. But others, including political analysts and state lawmakers fighting for more transparency, remain skeptical.

Fight record requests

New Jersey's constitution requires a balanced budget, and governors from both parties have for years fully disclosed revenue shortfalls even when they've been politically embarrassing. By not providing the detailed tax collection information in monthly revenue reports, it's harder to determine if the state budget is in balance.

The Record submitted a public records request in September for the revenue data the Christie administration said it would no longer publicly disclose, a request that was initially denied. After a lawyer for the newspaper submitted a letter asking Treasury to reconsider, the data were turned over, and they revealed a small shortfall in August and a narrow surplus for the months of July and August combined.

Christie's administration in March also changed how the state makes public annual property tax data, another tradition followed by governors of both parties. That move makes it more difficult to see where some homeowners are paying more thanks to Christie's cut to a property tax relief program. Online property tax tables going back to 2008 — two years before Christie took office — were also edited, obscuring the impact of that cut.

At the same time these policy changes have been made, Christie's administration has also been aggressively challenging requests for public records. The Record reported earlier this year that more than 20 different lawsuits have been filed against the Christie administration by individuals and organizations seeking public documents.

And a Superior Court judge ruled last month that the governor's office violated the state's Open Public Records Act when it failed earlier this year to give The Record a public document related to the George Washington Bridge lane closings.

"They've caught this disease where they no longer want to give anything to anyone," said Walter Luers, a lawyer who is president of the New Jersey Foundation for Open Government, a non-profit organization that advocates for transparency and expanded access to government records.

But state lawmakers have been trying to push back, introducing several bills aimed at making state government more open.

One of the bills would force the state to once again release the data demonstrating the net property tax bill in every community. Another sought to enhance reporting on state borrowing and the long-term affordability of that debt.

"Having heightened transparency and accountability is what the taxpayers have asked of us," said Assemblyman Troy Singleton, a sponsor of the legislation.

Information on debt

Borrowing has long been a big issue for New Jersey, among the country's most indebted states. This year, both houses of the Legislature, in unanimous votes, passed the bill that sought increased public reporting on state borrowing.

But Christie, who has increased borrowing each year he's been in office, vetoed the measure outright in September. His veto message took issue with the "highly speculative nature" of the information the bill would have required to be released.

Singleton, D-Burlington, said he didn't want to comment on the motives behind the governor's veto but said: "I think that some of the data is probably not what the administration would hope for and would want the world to see."

Asked about the reasons for this year's policy decisions, Christie spokesman Kevin Roberts said the changes the administration has made have nothing to do with making Christie's record look better in advance of a possible 2016 run for president.

Instead, he said, each change is backed by a "specific rationale" developed by state departments to make sure the information is accurate and not misleading.

Ford O'Connell, a Republican strategist based in Washington, D.C., said what Christie has been doing is "par for the course" for a potential presidential candidate.

Christie's top concern heading into the 2016 GOP primary and caucus season is his record on fiscal issues and the state economy, said O'Connell, who worked on John McCain's 2008 presidential campaign. And, he added, that record will be more important to primary voters than any lingering concerns about the bridge controversy or Christie's positions on social issues, which some conservatives have labeled as too moderate.

"The key to how far he goes comes down to how he can package and sell his fiscal management and the economic performance of the Garden State," O'Connell said. "That's his No. 1 concern right now."

Holding back key information won't mean those issues won't come up in early nomination-contest states like Iowa, said David Redlawsk, a former professor at the University of Iowa who now runs the Rutgers-Eagleton poll in New Jersey.

Voters in those states take their role seriously and pay close attention to issues like debt and budget shortfalls because they can shed light on how a candidate would handle federal spending, said Redlawsk, who is also the author of "Why Iowa? How Caucuses and Sequential Elections Improve the Presidential Nominating Process."

"You get into the weeds a bit," he said.

But not having precise figures handy for something like a budget shortfall could help Christie, he added.

"From Christie's standpoint," Redlawsk said, "it does make sense to minimize the availability of these particular numbers."

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