

News



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Democratic war of words over Rutgers-Rowan merger plan continues

By James Osborne
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The war of words between U.S. Sen. Frank Lautenberg and Gov. Christie over the governor's plan to realign New Jersey's public universities is showing no signs of a cease-fire.

On Monday, the Democratic senator from New Jersey criticized Republican Christie over a report that was commissioned by Rowan University on how to handle the regulatory and public relations issues surrounding the proposed merger of Rowan with Rutgers-Camden two months before the official announcement of the plan.

"This secret report shows that the fix was in long before the merger was even presented to the public," Lautenberg said in a statement. "The people of South Jersey don't want propaganda and marketing. They want substantive answers."

The report, an internal document posted to a website run by Rutgers-Camden alumni and faculty over the weekend, was written by the Learning Alliance on Higher Education, part of the University of Pennsylvania. The consultants advised the university on issues such as how to handle potential backlash from Rutgers faculty and how to be prepared for delays caused by legal challenges.

Rowan spokesman Joe Cardona said the university reached out to the group in November so it would be prepared if and when the governor announced a merger - which had been discussed in a governor's task force report released in January 2011.

"It wasn't a secret," he said. "The discussion about the merger coming was there. We talked about it publicly."

Cardona added that the university split the \$30,000 consulting cost with Cooper University Hospital, with which it has partnered on a new medical school in Camden. The chairman of Cooper is George E. Norcross III, a champion of the merger, who is a managing partner of an investor's group that on Monday purchased Philadelphia Media Network, the parent company of The Inquirer.

The merger proposal was included in a report released Jan. 25 about the future of the University of Medicine and Dentistry of New Jersey.

Christie and South Jersey Democrats, including Norcross and Senate President Stephen Sweeney (D., Gloucester), have been feuding with Lautenberg over the proposal for the last week. On Monday, the governor's office called Lautenberg's latest attack "more bitter nonsense."

"If a consultant was hired to consider the upsides, downsides, and feasibility of such a merger, that just seems like good planning," a statement from spokesman Michael Drewniak said.

The governor is traveling in Israel.

According to a new poll from Rutgers' Eagleton Institute of Politics, 59 percent of registered voters in New Jersey are opposed to the merger.

"Those working toward the merger have apparently not made their case to New Jerseyans," Rutgers political science professor David Redlawsk said in a statement.

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