



Opinion: Christie's balancing act

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THE RECORD

It could be the most challenging spending program of his six years in office.

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AGAINST A BACKDROP of what appears to be his ever-quickening pace toward a national candidacy while confronting dramatic declines in his public approval standing at home, Governor Christie will deliver his proposed fiscal year 2016 budget to a joint session of the Legislature on Tuesday.

It could be the most challenging spending program of his six years in office.

With 7 in 10 New Jerseyans of the opinion that the governor's actions are taken in furtherance of his national ambitions and fewer than 4 in 10 expressing approval of his job performance, Christie faces the task of reasserting his leadership at home while at the same time hewing to the fiscal conservatism orthodoxy so dear to the hearts of nation.

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programs.

His deep cuts in the state's contribution to the fund — just over \$2 billion — came only three years after enactment of landmark legislation designed to put the system on firmer financial footing by requiring an increase in employee contributions and establishing a seven-year payment timetable for the state.

Democrats, led by Senate President Stephen Sweeney, reacted by pledging undying opposition to greater worker contributions or reductions in benefits and insisting the state live up to its end of the bargain struck in the 2011 legislation.

Other than Christie appointing a commission to review the pension system and develop recommendations for changes in it, there's been no discernible movement toward a resolution.

Sweeney, anxious to reingratiate himself with organized labor groups infuriated by the key role he played in passage of the 2011 revisions, isn't about to budge from his position, particularly if — as widely assumed — he intends to seek the 2017 Democratic nomination for governor.

Christie's address will have to include some reference to the pension funding issue and the proposed budget will include some level of state contribution, but the odds are it will merely be a starting point for what appears to be a contentious and divisive debate.

While the Trust Fund and pension system have been the more dominant in speculation about the budget, there are other worrisome issues for Christie. The state's overall economic health, the slow pace of recovery and job creation, an unemployment rate consistently greater than the national average and repeated downgrades of its credit rating have been used periodically by the governor's critics as evidence of his unsuitability to lead the national government.

Highest-in-nation property taxes

With the average property tax bill in New Jersey now exceeding \$8,100 — easily the highest in the nation — there is growing ~~rad~~iveness that the governor has ignored the state's most troublesome and seemingly intractable issue and placed his interest in national politics over the well-being of New Jerseyans.

With the limited resources at his disposal and the pressure to address the Trust Fund renewal and the precarious position of the pension system, its doubtful Christie will be able to offer any significant steps toward property tax relief. He's already deferred the homestead rebate program three times and may be forced to do so again, and municipal governments and school districts should not anticipate significantly greater state aid to offset local tax increases.

Fiscal issues aside — serious as they may be — Christie will also deliver his message in an atmosphere of considerable anxiety brought about by the multiple federal investigations of his administration and