

## Who has the key to the "tool kit"?

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**Carl Golden/NJ Voices**

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About the only place the term "tool kit" can be heard more frequently than the New Jersey Statehouse is on an episode of "Extreme Makeover, Home Edition."

From Gov. Chris Christie's town hall tour to legislative committee hearings, speeches, news releases, blogs and op-ed columns, Republicans are promoting the virtues of the "tool kit" as the most effective money saving device ever put on paper while Democrats are dismissing it as well orchestrated political public relations with negligible impact on local property tax rates. For both, to err on the side of hyperbole is central to make their case.

The Governor has used his town hall sessions to belabor the Democratic legislative leadership for what he argues is a refusal to act on key components of the "tool kit" while ridiculing it for spending valuable time voting on trivial bills like one involving neutering of pets.

He's threatened to use their inaction in the 2011 legislative elections by taking to the campaign trail and blaming Democrats for increases in property taxes, layoffs, or service reductions.

Democrats push back by pointing out many of the recommendations have already been enacted and the remainder will be considered before the end of the year.

Democrats argue the "tool kit" will be of minimal help in controlling property taxes and genuine relief can be

Advocates of the "tool kit" have focused on proposals to permit local governments to opt out of the classified civil service system and to cap increases in public employee salaries negotiated under binding arbitration as the key elements in reducing costs and curbing the rise in property taxes.

These ideas present a dilemma for Democrats since they are perceived as harmful to unionized public employees, a voting bloc upon which Democrats have historically relied for financial and ballot box support.

The concerted effort to shift the debate toward the greater value of shared services, accompanied by a more aggressive attempt at consolidation, seems designed to position Democrats as a party serious about controlling property taxes while offering some assurances to its organized labor constituency that it will be held harmless.

From the outset of his Administration Christie wrote off public employees and has relentlessly attacked them as the principal cause of high property taxes. His focus on permitting local governments to drop civil service and to dramatically limit arbitration awards is consistent with his strategy and he's clearly concluded there is no political risk in pursuing his agenda.

The one attempt made by Democrats to approve an amended binding arbitration system by establishing a two per cent cap on awards as a guide rather than as a mandate ended in embarrassment when the Assembly leadership was unable to secure majority support from its own members. Its most recent attempt at compromise – a two per cent cap on awards with exceptions and a three-year sunset provision --- was shot down by Christie minutes after it was announced.

In the meantime, Democrats have been belabored daily by their Republican colleagues in the Legislature, along with mayors and assorted local officials of both parties, for not acting on the remainder of the "tool kit."

Democrats are quick to point to their role in enacting a two per cent limit on property tax increases as evidence of their commitment to fiscal responsibility and tax relief while contending that what remains of the Governor's agenda can and should be amended to improve it.

At the same time, they are stepping up their criticism of the Administration for overselling the "tool kit" and deceiving taxpayers into believing it offers immediate, significant relief.

Achieving greater progress in convincing municipalities to enter into shared services agreements as a way to reduce costs is a relevant argument and a serious debate worth having.

No one, however, should anticipate Christie will be any less intense in efforts to win approval of his "tool kit." Nor, should his threat to pin a failure to act on the Democrats and make it the centerpiece of the 2011 election campaign be considered an idle one.

Democrats fully grasp the restiveness of taxpayers and, if anyone fails to recognize the discontent, the congressional election results this year serve as a reminder.

The lines are drawn and the competing political interests heading into 2011 are clear.

Sometime in the first week of next November, there will be a starring role available for someone in "Extreme Makeover, Statehouse Edition."

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