

Opinion: Sweeney's line in the sand

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AS LINES in the sand go, the one just drawn by

Tax veto

Given Christie's unbreakable vow to veto any tax increase, should one reach him as part of the budget, he'll surely strike it and return the bill to the Legislature. If Sweeney remains true to his promise, he'll refuse to permit a floor vote on the governor's recommended amendments, leaving the state without a budget.

It must be noted that Sweeney promised to follow through on a shutdown if the governor proposed scaling back on the state's contribution or skipping it entirely. Deliberately or not, he left the door slightly ajar to a discussion of closing the gap by exacting concessions from public employees beyond those granted by the 2011 legislation, most prominently an increase in employee contributions to both their health and pension benefits.

There well may be an opportunity to tweak various elements of the system — albeit not without furious opposition from public employee unions — but with hundreds of millions of dollars potentially involved, the tweekers will be hard pressed to come up with enough ideas to have a meaningful impact.

There will surely be talk again of ending so-called "double dipping," a longtime practice that permits retired public employees to collect their pensions while returning to state service and collecting a salary as well.

In the wake of Sweeney's remarks, speculation arose that, given his interest in pursuing the 2017 Democratic nomination for governor, it was a very public and early attempt to take some of the sting out of the key — if not decisive — role he played in the 2011 pension legislation.

He was vilified at the time, first for working so closely with Christie and, by implication at least, joining the governor's crusade to identify public employee salaries and fringe benefits as the root cause of the state's fiscal problems and, secondly, for betraying his life-long labor union history.

Taking a hard line stand against any further changes in the pension system will serve to heal some of those lingering wounds and reestablish Sweeney as a dedicated ally of organized labor, a key constituency — organizational as well as financial — for any Democrat seeking the governor's office.

Mistrust

Moreover, it sends a signal of Sweeney's sensitivity to the criticism that his alliance with Christie has produced mistrust on the part of some Democrats. Complaints have surfaced from time to time that he has, by aligning himself with the governor on numerous m 5 Tw[-.0033v0, he'll won .0025 863 Oo ants

