

OPINION: CHRISTIE, SWEENEY REMAIN WORLDS APART ON PENSIONS, HEALTH BENEFITS

CARL GOLDEN | JULY 29, 2014

Can governor and Senate president reconcile their separate visions and achieve meaningful reform?



When Gov. Chris Christie unveils his proposal to dramatically alter the public employee pension and health benefits programs sometime next month, the air around the Legislature will be filled with words and phrases like "compromise," "bipartisanship," and "reaching common ground."

Given the rhetoric from the competing interests on the issue so

Many unionized workers are still smarting from the Senate president's aligning himself with Christie to require increased pension contributions. A sign from him that he's open to a similar alliance now would be devastating to any hopes he holds of becoming the party's gubernatorial nominee in 2017.

The only sliver of hope to resolve their differences may be found in shifting from the current defined-benefit pension plan to one similar to a 401(k), an idea Sweeney supported three years ago but dropped from the final legislation under union pressure. Revisiting it could be dangerous for him, however, bringing up memories of his deal-making with the governor and raising questions of trustworthiness. Nerves are still raw from that episode.

By elevating the issue to such prominence, it's almost certain that Christie will propose a more far-reaching and in-depth program than merely shifting the manner in which the program is administered. Moreover, he's pledged to hold retirees harmless, maintain their current level of benefits -- thereby exerting even greater pressure on active members of the system.

As has become his custom, Christie has taken to the road on behalf of his pension-reform efforts, telling his town hall audiences that the cost of the benefits system is driving the state toward bankruptcy. He invokes the image of Detroit and the bleak future it faces while warning that without dramatic cost containment, a similar fate will befall New Jersey.

He engages in his familiar beat down of public employees, blaming the escalating price of their

Given Christie's timetable, the issue will in all likelihood preoccupy the Legislature in its fall session and into 2015, an election year for the Assembly. The pieces are in place for months of contentious, politically driven debate.

Christie and Sweeney -- while far apart on the issue -- hold the key to genuine, fair and lasting reform of the pension system.

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