



Opinion: For Senate president, a balancing act

OCTOBER 17, 2014, 4:23 PM LAST UPDATED: FRIDAY, OCTOBER 17, 2014, 4:23 PM

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THE RECENT verbal sniping between Senate President Stephen Sweeney and billionaire investor Carl Icahn over the impending closure of the Taj Mahal Casino Hotel in Atlantic City exposed a potentially prickly political dilemma for Sweeney should he decide — as many suspect — to seek the Democratic nomination for governor in 2017: striking a balance between his allegiance to his South Jersey constituent base and the pressures from the voter-rich North Jersey counties to expand legalized gaming in their region.

Up until a few months ago, Sweeney stood shoulder to shoulder with Governor Christie, both insisting that the five-year turnaround/recovery plan for Atlantic City be allowed to run its full course before any discussions began over proposals for expansion. Both have since softened their positions in public comments suggesting they are now open to considering sites outside of Atlantic City for casino development.

Sweeney's confrontation with Icahn — a lead owner of the Taj Mahal — came after the investor threatened to close the hotel by mid-November unless he received major union concessions as well as significant state aid and local tax relief. If the shutdown occurs, it will be the fifth casino hotel to cease operations and will add another 3,000 jobs to the total loss of more than 8,000 already experienced.

Sweeney swiftly rejected Icahn's demand for state aid while the city's mayor said it could not afford to reduce the hotel's property tax levy.

The billionaire accused Sweeney of selling out the unionized casino employees as well as the entire South Jersey region by actively discussing expanding casino operations in North Jersey at a time when the gaming industry is in a struggle for its very existence.

By confronting Icahn, Sweeney may be punching above his weight class.

Little leverage

He has little leverage to exert to force the investor into moderating his demands other than standing with his union colleagues and denouncing Icahn for his callous treatment of low- to middle-income workers who've

While Sweeney must tread this political balance beam, his potential rivals for the gubernatorial nomination — Jersey City Mayor Steve Fulop and former Ambassador to Germany Philip Murphy — are largely free to chart their own course on the casino-expansion issue unencumbered by the weight of previous commitments.

Rising pressure