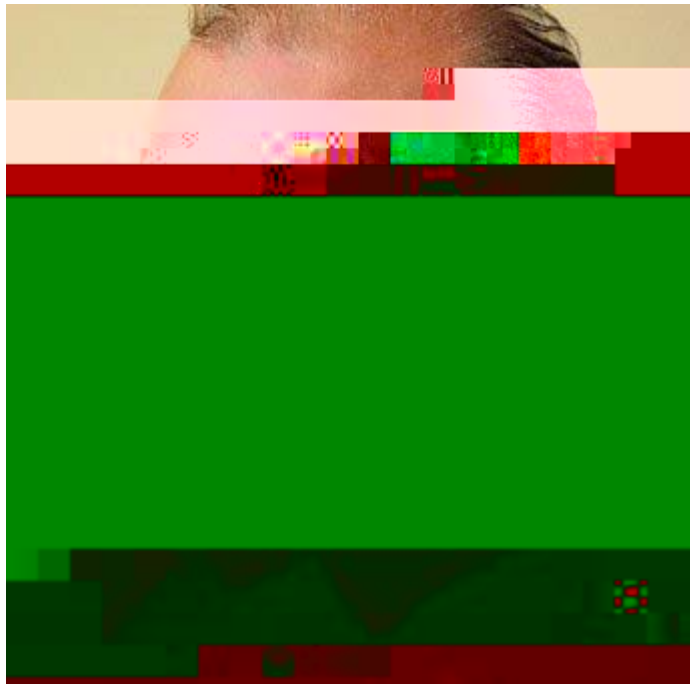


Opinion: N.J. voters should expect budget battle rehash during campaign season

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By **Times of Trenton guest opinion column**



Senate President Stephen Sweeney in a file photo.

While Sweeney's anger was genuine, his bitterness and frustration spilled over out of his sense that he'd been used by the governor to steer the ground-breaking but politically risky pension and health benefits reform package through the Legislature — a major victory for Christie — only to suffer the humiliation of being ignored by the governor's office and seeing decimated the budget passed by the Legislature.

While some senators applauded Sweeney for the ferocity of his attack, others grumbled he'd been badly outmaneuvered and wound up with the worst of all worlds — alienating organized labor with the health benefits/pension reform bill and suffering the humiliation of watching their spending programs hit the cutting-room floor.

Sweeney frittered away his political leverage by failing to insist that support for the health/pension legislation was contingent on Christie agreeing to elements of the Democratic budget.

His critics say that it was misplaced trust, a basic, fundamental error committed by someone insufficiently schooled in the art of the power politics common to the Statehouse.

In light of the uproar, there is an undercurrent talk of replacement, moving Sweeney aside in January in favor of someone more sure-footed in dealing with Christie in the political mosh pit from which public policies eventually emerge.

Whatever Sweeney's future holds, Democrats are pinning a great deal of hope on portraying Christie as mean-spirited and cruel, eager to use the power of his office to settle scores and dismiss as collateral damage the thousands of innocent people who will be denied help as part of the social safety net.

By forcing a vote on the governor's vetoes, while acknowledging they'll fall short of the number required to override, Democrats seek to remind voters of Christie's actions and to write into the record the support of Republicans for what they will characterize as heartless and cruel. Republicans are expected to remain unified, though some may swallow hard as they vote to sustain the veto of women's health-care programs or tuition assistance or health insurance for the working poor.

It's an "all-in" strategy that can be tailored to specific legislative districts. Attack ads will remind taxpayers that the governor's municipal aid cuts will produce property-tax increases and that it was done with the support of their legislators. The text will vary to fit the issue, but the overarching message will be the same: Thanks to the governor and the Republicans, middle-class New Jerseyans will pay more for everything, while the richest citizens will be spared any personal economic angst.

The Republican response will be consistent: The state is financially distressed, there's no money to pay for new or expanded programs and the Democrats' budget is typical of the party's tax-and-spend philosophy that brought the state to its knees, requiring strong, decisive leadership by the governor to restore order and discipline.

Voters can look forward to a bombardment of campaign material this fall, with Democratic candidates urging them to send a message to the governor that the Republicans' scorched-earth fiscal policies are deeply harmful, while Republicans will argue their case that spending is out of control and taxpayers deserve the relief their party offers.

There is some risk involved for the Republicans, especially if stabilization of local property taxes fails to materialize. That issue occupies the core of voter discontent, as it has for many years, but there is a raised expectation that the corner may have been turned and relief is at hand. If