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The Record - "Pass The Tool Kit"

Thursday, December 8, 2010 • Tags: [Pension and Benefits](#)

Opinion Roundup

SICK PAY

The Star-Ledger, "Our hope is that the final [Sick Pay] reform is closer to Christie's":

"Like a fired-up fairy godmother, Gov. Chris Christie asked three Democratic mayors at a recent town hall meeting: If they had a magic wand, what would be their one wish? He knew already, of course, exactly what it would be. Democrats in the Legislature have passed Christie's reforms on pensions and health care. That's progress. But the work is not yet done. They're still stalling on two key pieces of reform: civil service and sick pay...Democrats have proposed their own reforms that go part of the way toward a solution. A compromise is called for to get this done. But our hope is that the final reform is closer to Christie's." ("N.J. Gov. Chris Christie's sick pay, civil service reforms win Democratic mayors' support," Star-Ledger Editorial Board, 12/8/11)

The Star-Ledger, "Democrats should back Governor Chris Christie's policy on sick, vacation pay":

"Sick and vacation pay have become budget-busting golden parachutes. ... Municipalities must pay whopping bills that have been decades in the making. Many don't have the cash on hand, so they've had to borrow. ...Here's the problem: Democrats still want to give public workers a going-away present. ... Gov. Chris Christie wants to stop this now. Under his plan, a cop would get what he or she has accumulated, but earn nothing more. He's absolutely right. Why should taxpayers be forced to pay for benefits that far exceed anything they get themselves? Sick days should be just that: Days to use when you're actually sick. Democrats already have backpedaled from \$15,000 to \$7,500. They should keep going — to zero. (Editorial, "Democrats Should Back Gov. Chris Christie's Policy On Sick, Vacation Pay," Star-

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Asbury Park Press, The elimination of sick leave payouts should be the goal of sick leave reform:

“It isn’t rocket science. Unused sick days by New Jersey’s public employees should have no cash value when those workers retire. As Gov. Chris Christie has often noted, “Sick days are for when you’re sick. And taxpayers and mayors working on tight budgets should not have to pay the cost for accumulated sick time.” The long-term goal of any reform in this regard has to be the elimination of this “phantom” perk, not some Byzantine work-around. The latest wrong-headed approach to this issue comes from Assemblywoman Pamela Lampitt, D-Camden, who introduced legislation last week that would attach an actuarial value to future accumulated sick leave that exceeds 60 days, then permit retiring public employees to use that value to reduce their post-retirement medical benefits by up to \$7,500. ... This is just one more half-measure that should not make it to the governor’s desk. If it does, Gov. Chris Christie should veto it. ... A \$15,000 cap has been in effect for state workers since 1986. Christie rightly wants to eliminate it. ... It is time for public employees to realize that the true value of good health is ... good health. Not a jackpot upon retirement.” (Editorial, “Unused sick days: Don’t compromise,” Asbury Park Press, 12/5/11)

The Times of Trenton Editorial Board, “We urge legislators to act immediately” on the Governor’s sick time reform:

“Some of the measures Gov. Christie is counting on to help bring about property tax relief are complicated and thorny initiatives. The push to end the widespread practice of workers cashing in unused sick time is not. While Democratic legislative leaders have offered a \$7,500 cap on sick-time payouts, the governor is adamant about doing away with the payouts entirely. ... Gov. Christie also wants to halt the stockpiling of vacation time for more than one year. He’s right. ... the state can no longer afford to pay out millions every year because some workers salt away their sick time for a healthy payout at the end of their careers. That sort of bonanza must end. The governor’s plan to do so is a fair one. It would not take away anything from employees who have already accrued the time. But it would establish a new clear and consistent policy that prohibits sick time and vacation benefits from being used as a bank. We urge legislators to act immediately and make that change. (Editorial, “End Sick Time Payouts For N.J. Public Workers,” The Times of Trenton Editorial Board, 11/20/11)

'DO NOTHING LEGISLATURE'

The Star-Ledger, “Democrats must do something ... like finish passing tool kit”:

“Gov. Chris Christie, frustrated that the Democrats apparently have abandoned the final pieces of his 33-bill reform package, has labeled them the “Do Nothing Legislature.” Ironically, the guy who has criticized teachers is now handing out his own legislative grade: incomplete. We think he’s being generous. We’d flunk ‘em...Senate President Stephen Sweeney — content to have Christie share the blame — insists the Democrats have passed “the real stuff” to help manage the 2 percent property tax levy cap. Remaining tool-kit bills have been vetoed by the too-picky governor or wouldn’t have much effect on property taxes anyway, Sweeney says. That’s simply not true...Civil service: The outdated and onerous system — which makes hiring, firing and transferring public workers difficult — should be streamlined, then put before the voters of the towns that still use it. Let taxpayers decide to keep it or chuck it...(And

we haven't even mentioned the Democrats' lack of urgency on ethics reform and curbing sick-time payouts.)...Christie is right to call out the Legislature, which should get off its butt and work with him. (Editorial, "Democrats must do something ... like finish passing tool kit," Star-Ledger Editorial Board, 5/1/11)

Asbury Park Press, "Christie correct about N.J.' 'Do Nothing Legislature'":

"The problem with doing nothing, the old saying goes, is that you never know when you're finished. Well, as far as Gov. Chris Christie is concerned, the Legislature should finish doing nothing and get to work. At a town hall meeting last week, he unveiled a report card for the Legislature showing where it has fallen down on the job. In all eight areas he graded, he gave them, appropriately in our view, "Incompletes." Actually, it is a wonder he didn't just give the Legislature a big fat "F" all across the board. This showed either an uncharacteristic generosity on the part of Christie or one more example of hope triumphing over experience. Even if the Democratic-majority Legislature disagrees with certain particulars of the governor's agenda, it should be presenting reasonable alternatives as a starting point for negotiation and compromise. The longer it tarries, the more appropriate the governor's sobriquet — "The Do-Nothing Legislature" — becomes...Why have the lawmakers failed to act on 15 of the 20 measures in the governor's property tax tool kit? Why no Civil Service reform or an end to the abuse of sick days by state workers? ...Do something!" (Editorial, "Christie correct about N.J.' 'Do Nothing Legislature,'" Daily Record / Courier-Post / Asbury Park Press, 5/1/11)

The Courier-Post, "The Legislature and its Democratic leaders ... are failing overtaxed New Jerseyans" by not acting on Tool Kit:

"Christie is not just blowing hot air when he lambastes the Democrat-controlled Legislature for failing to act on most of the bills that would make law of the various tools in his tool kit. By and large, the Legislature has not acted. Its leaders have purposefully stalled on measures that clearly would help towns and school districts cut costs and budget under the 2 percent cap but would also upset key special interest groups — mainly public workers. ... Nonetheless, it seems there are many in the Legislature who are just fine with the status quo. They won't say it out loud, but they don't want to institute the tool kit bills because they want the 2 percent cap to fail and be repealed as soon as Christie is out of the governor's office. By choosing the status quo, it is the Legislature and its Democratic leaders who are failing overtaxed New Jerseyans." (Editorial, "Dems have whiffed on needed reforms," Courier-Post, 5/13/11)

The Gloucester County Times, "Accumulation of sick/vacation time ... is a problem that needs a prompt reversal":

"Senate President Stephen Sweeney and Assembly Speaker Sheila Oliver are stalling over ways to help towns curb fixed costs under the 2 percent spending caps the state has mandated. Not all of Christie's so-called "tool kit" bills will yield immediate savings, but the Legislature has put a "whenever" timetable on too many of them...Accumulation of sick/vacation time over years and years, so employees can claim big checks on their last day, is a problem that needs a prompt reversal. The Legislature hasn't provided one. True, the Legislature sent Christie a weaker sick-leave "cap" bill that he conditionally vetoed. But that shouldn't run out the clock on this measure ... New Jersey doesn't really have a "Do-Nothing Legislature." It does have one that's dragging its 240 collective feet on some key reforms." (Editorial, "Do-

nothing tag fits, to a point," The Gloucester County Times, 5/11/11)

TOOL KIT

The Star-Ledger, "The worst outcome would be to put this cap in place but skip over the reforms needed to cut costs":

"Remember, too, that the cap itself is only the first step. Its success hinges on further reforms that will actually reduce costs to local governments and schools...The most important of these is the governor's proposed 2.5 percent cap on labor costs, inclusive of salaries and benefits...The worst outcome would be to put this cap in place but skip over the reforms needed to cut costs. That would force massive layoffs that would cripple our schools and local governments." (Editorial, "Tax cap is first step; its success hinges on further reforms," Star-Ledger Editorial Board, 7/13/2010)

The Record, "Pass the tool kit":

"The effects of the hard cap on municipal spending that was passed by the Legislature and signed by Christie earlier this year will be felt soon. Time is running out for legislators, and in many a municipal building the alarm already has sounded. Budgets for next year cannot be crafted on possible legislative fixes. If the Legislature does not act, draconian tax hikes will occur in many of New Jersey's 566 municipalities...The tool kit is not the ultimate solution for the state's runaway debt, but it is a necessary part of the equation...By ignoring the tool kit, legislators continue to avoid confrontation with powerful unions. There is little political capital at risk by calling for shared services without providing the means of reducing the costs for service. But there is actual capital at risk: taxpayers' money. New Jerseyans don't need to hear what they already know. They need to see what has not been done finally accomplished. Pass the tool kit." ("Enough rhetoric," The Record, 11/11/2010)

The Record, "Lawmakers have made mainly cosmetic changes, passing laws that sound good but won't actually save much money":

"Christie would argue that he's given them the money-saving strategies they'll need, in a "tool kit" package of proposed reforms, including changing civil service and arbitration rules. And that's where the Legislature is supposed to come in, and approve new laws to empower towns to cut costs. Mostly, it hasn't. Lawmakers have made mainly cosmetic changes, passing laws that sound good but won't actually save much money...Municipal leaders need to apply pressure of their own on legislators to act. Unless they do, it will be taxpayers caught in a vise. And that is the wrong tool for reform." ("No tools in the box," The Record, 11/9/2010)

Asbury Park Press, "Sweeney needs to get started...":

"Sweeney, D-Gloucester, seems to think that because Christie's so-called tool kit of property tax reforms won't cure every ill that ails New Jersey's body politic, the tools are props and in some cases not worth enacting. That's ridiculous. Christie never claimed his tool kit would usher in a low-tax utopia. He is simply trying to make the state more bearable for taxpayers...Sweeney and Christie proclaimed themselves ready to work with each other to pass reforms. Sweeney should know that proclamations are one thing. Doing the actual work is quite another... William G. Dressel Jr., executive director of the New Jersey State League of Municipalities hit the tool kit nail on the head: "Is it

the panacea to our property tax woes? No." But the measures are a start, he added. Sweeney needs to get started, too, instead of deriding the tool kit as a false panacea when it was never characterized as one." ("Start banging with tool kit," Asbury Park Press, 11/5/2010)

Asbury Park Press, "The only way to get a handle on high property taxes...is for the Legislature to give Gov. Chris Christie his "tool kit" of legislative initiatives":

"The only way to get a handle on high property taxes, which are draining the lifeblood out of New Jersey and its hard-pressed homeowners, is for the Legislature to give Gov. Chris Christie his "tool kit" of legislative initiatives. Until the state can get public salaries and compensation packages under control, the outlook is bleak, recession or no recession...When three out of every four dollars at the local level are spent on personnel, the solutions — many of which can be found in Christie's proposed tool kit — are obvious: Reform the binding arbitration process. Allow municipalities to opt out of the civil service system. Provide incentives to towns that share services or consolidate... There are those, including this newspaper, that have been beating the drum for real and dramatic reform for the better part of a decade. It might have been easier to ignore both the taxpayers and the drumbeat when the economy and the Dow were humming along. Those days are over. And for the Legislature, so is summer vacation. It's time to get to work. ("Give Christie His 'Tool Kit,'" Asbury Park Press, 9/2/2010)

Asbury Park Press, "Christie's 33-bill "tool kit"...in conjunction with a hard tax cap — will provide, over time, real property tax relief":

"Trenton legislators these days may not be one big happy family, but if they get this tax cap passed, they can know that they have begun to do precisely what New Jersey voters elected them to do. Note the choice of words: Begun to do. Now that the Statehouse crowd has gotten used to working during the summer, let legislators take up Christie's 33-bill "tool kit," which — in conjunction with a hard tax cap — will provide, over time, real property tax relief. As the governor said over the weekend, "In leadership, there's always a moment when you have an opportunity to get something done, and you better not let that moment go by." Exactly. And now is that moment." ("Property tax cap compromise is a good first step, Asbury Park Press, 7/7/2010)

Asbury Park Press, "Christie's "far-reaching" tool kit "essential to getting New Jersey back on a sound financial footing...":

"When the only tool you have is a hammer, everything looks like a nail. And when it comes to the fiscal calamity that is New Jersey, a hammer is surely what is needed. And there are plenty of welcome, much-needed hammers in Gov. Chris Christie's "tool kit" for fixing New Jersey - his 33 proposed property tax relief reforms. Many of these reforms, outlined by Christie Monday, are long overdue, including the tightening of spending caps at all levels of government, allowing towns to opt out of civil service, changing the ground rules for collective bargaining and instituting controls on public employee salaries and benefits. Christie's far-reaching steps are essential to getting New Jersey back on a sound financial footing..." ("Allow flexibility in contract caps," Asbury Park Press, 5/12/2010)

Daily Record, "The Speaker would do better to concentrate on the future. And that means finding ways to

get the tool kit adopted”:

“Every day, it seems, Gov. Chris Christie's office issues press releases about the progress, or lack thereof, that the Legislature is making with the governor's so-called tool kit, a 33-bill package to reform property taxes in New Jersey. On Tuesday, the release noted that there were "only 35 days" left in this year's Legislative session to enact the reforms. Tuesday's release highlighted support for the tool kit from state Sen. Brian Stack, D-Hudson...Sheila Y. Oliver, the Assembly Speaker, recently described property taxes as a "tax without a conscience"...If that's the case, why not pass the tool kit?...Passing Christie's reforms are not going to suddenly reduce property taxes. But we will be moving in the right direction...In a recent op-ed column, Oliver gives lukewarm support to Christie's ideas...the Speaker would do better to concentrate on the future. And that means finding ways to get the tool kit adopted.” (“Stop playing with the "tool kit," -- pass it,” Daily Record, 11/17/2010)

Daily Record, “The Democrats need to stop dawdling and pass the tool kit”:

“...no reason for Sweeney, Assembly Speaker Sheila Oliver and the rest of the Democrats in the Senate and Assembly not to pass Christie's tool kit. The bills it contains will help stabilize property taxes. Language giving the state more power in regard to mergers always can be added after the main package is approved. The Democrats need to stop dawdling and pass the tool kit.” (“Sweeney has a point about the ‘tool kit,’” Daily Record, 11/12/2010)

Daily Record, Gov. Christie’s Tool Kit is needed to “giv[e] local officials the ability to impose [2 percent property tax cap]”:

“It's easy to talk about restricting the annual growth of local government to, say, 2.5 percent, but accomplishing it is not as simple as it sounds. Gov. Chris Christie on Monday unveiled a 33-bill package to do just that, something he has called a "tool kit" for local governing bodies...he is proposing to change the rules of collective bargaining to give towns and school districts more ammunition to hold down pay increases...We have had a variety of spending caps on municipal government for years, but a series of exceptions made them just about meaningless. Additionally, the effect of a cap was minimized by contract settlements awarding annual increases to cops and teachers in excess of 4 percent. The governor clearly realizes that a cap is insignificant without giving local officials the ability to impose it. And that's something he is trying to do. Just about all the nearly three dozen reforms proposed Monday move in that direction...We applaud the governor's direction...” (“Christie's tool chest,” Daily Record, 5/11/2010)

Press of Atlantic City, “Lawmakers must realize these measures are essential to ensuring the new cap works...”:

“The state League of Municipalities is raising concerns about passing the new cap law before passing an accompanying plan to give towns more power to rein in spending. Key provisions in that 33-bill "tool kit" for local officials include changing binding-arbitration laws to be more taxpayer-friendly, capping salary increases and other measures to reduce the cost of employee contracts. The League has reason to worry. State lawmakers will face intense lobbying from public-employee unions. They have bowed to union pressure in the past. Still, the climate in Trenton has changed. And lawmakers must realize these measures are essential to ensuring the new cap works - and that beleaguered property taxpayers finally get some relief. (“Cap-tax compromise / Art of the possible,” Press of Atlantic City, 7/6/2010)

Press of Atlantic City, Governor Christie's "tool kit" is "long-overdue":

"Christie's proposed "tool kit" is long-overdue legislation needed to bring New Jersey's spiraling property taxes and spending into line - from changes in binding arbitration laws to capping future accrual of unused sick time for public employees." (Editorial, "Tax plans of Christie, Democrats / Don't let rancor get in way of reform," Press of Atlantic City, 3/16/11)

Home News Tribune, Many Camden County Democratic government officials wishlist of ideas "ended up on Christie's tool kit list":

"...more than 30 ideas Democratic county government officials in Camden County put on a wishlist of ideas to help them save tax dollars. They quietly circulated their list among state legislators more than a year ago, hoping for support. Many of their ideas, almost word for word, ended up on Christie's tool kit list." ("Lawmakers must clear away barriers to consolidation," Home News Tribune, 11/14/2010)

Courier-Post, "Overall, this is the most far-reaching and credible attempt we've seen to improve the financial health of the Garden State...":

"Hard cap on tax increases means real relief for New Jersey taxpayers. If the pension and benefit reforms signed by Gov. Chris Christie in March were a small first step, his latest proposal for is a record long jump. Last week, Christie introduced a 33-point package -- a tool kit, as it were, for the state, local municipalities, school districts, public colleges and other government bodies in New Jersey to rein in costs. The reforms Christie has offered are no joke. They're not like what came out of the dog-and-pony-show special session on property taxes that lawmakers staged in 2006. Then, legislators and Gov. Jon Corzine didn't really have the stomach for the hard reforms needed to actually lower property taxes. So they put on a big event just to nibble around the edges of the problem...Flash forward to 2010. The current governor, just four months into office, has put forward bona fide reforms that could actually do the unimaginable and just maybe lower our highest-in-the-nation taxes. Imagine that...Other key aspects of Christie's proposal that will help fix this state's broken finances: An option for towns and counties, by ordinance or referendum, to opt out of the expensive civil service system. Rule changes that will make it easier for towns, districts, etc. to see immediate savings from mergers...Overall, this is the most far-reaching and credible attempt we've seen to improve the financial health of the Garden State and fix the state's biggest problem -- repressively high taxes..." ("Finally, Reforms Could Lower Taxes," Courier-Post, 5/16/2010)

Daily Journal, "Lawmakers must begin work on passing the governor's "tool kit":

"The work of the Legislature can't end with this measure. Once approved, lawmakers must begin work on passing the governor's "tool kit," which will give local officials the tools they will need to meet the cap -- such as changes to civil service and arbitration." ("First approve 2 percent cap and then more," Daily Journal, 7/10/2010)

Charles Stile, The Record, "The new property tax cap is dependent on Christie's 33...'tool kit' bills The new property tax cap is dependent on Christie's 33...'tool kit' bills":

“The new property tax cap is dependent on Christie’s 33...“tool kit” bills that are expected to make it easier for town and school officials to manage costs under the new mandate. The bills will also tame the power of public employee unions. Collective bargaining rules would be rewritten and tilt more in favor of management during arbitration, pension benefits would face another round of reform, and towns would no longer be required to enroll in the Civil Service system, which would let local officials ignore seniority in their personnel decisions. Democratic and Republican legislative have vowed to hunker down on those bills over the summer and have expressed confidence of enacting some of those reforms.” (Charles Stile, “Stile: Tax cap lets Christie boast help’s on the way.” The Record, 7/8/2010)

Former Assembly Speaker Joseph Roberts Jr., a Camden County Democrat, “...We should get the balance of the proposed “tool box” reforms passed”:

“...We should get the balance of the proposed “tool box” reforms passed. Granted, Gov. Chris Christie’s reforms borrow from measures introduced by legislators on both sides of the aisle over the past decade. That should only underscore the need for expeditious action on most of the bills he has proposed. The Legislature’s enactment of an improved cap on property taxes was significant; now, there should be action on overhauling our civil service rules, reforming the arbitration process and strengthening the executive county school superintendents positions created four years ago.” (Joseph Roberts Jr, “To cut costs, Gov. Christie's toolbox just a start,” Star-Ledger Guest Columnist, 11/16/2010)

George Amick, The Times of Trenton, “Tax cap, tool kit must go together”:

“Christie, to his credit, also wants the Legislature to create a “tool kit” stocked with more than two dozen reforms of the kind the League sought in 2006. These include revisions to a rigid and antiquated civil service law to allow towns to opt out of the system (now, once in, they're locked in), relief from state-imposed spending mandates, and changes relating to pensions and benefits...couldn't have put it better than Chris Christie did when he said: "It's not just the cap. It's the tool kit, as well. Both must be done. One cannot be done without the other. If you do the tool kit without the cap, it renders the tool kit less effective. If you do the cap without the tool kit, it makes the cap unworkable.” (George Amick, “Tax cap, tool kit must go together,” The Times of Trenton, 7/5/2010)

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