

Golden: That was the year that was

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THE RECORD

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THE YEAR 2015 has passed into history and, for New Jersey government and politics, it can be neatly divided into two parts: The first dominated scandal, investigation and indictment and the second Governor Christie's pursuit of the Republican presidential nomination.

In between, there occurred little of consequence.

Consider:

- *The Transportation Trust Fund continue to inch toward bankruptcy.
- *The public pension plans remain significantly underfunded and continue to sink further into debt.
- *Property taxes continue to rise and, on average, remain the highest in the nation.
- *The economic future of Atlantic City is still in doubt.
- *Whether casino gambling will be allowed to expand into northern New Jersey remain unresolved.

Should Christie continue his national campaign — he is expected to announce howling in the Feb. 9 New Hampshire primary election — significant progress on resolving the issues would be in consideration of doubt.

Just as he has a strategy and put into motion maneuver in furtherance of that strategy, too, will Democrats move into the ear with the gubernatorial and legislative election of 2017 in mind.

Christie's prolonged absence from the state as his campaign unfolds will mitigate against his personal participation in negotiating resolution and will add to the public perception that his interest in New Jersey issues continue to fade.

Plummeting support

His administration has exacted a toll, however, and Christie's favorability at home has fallen to historic lows while confidence in his ability to handle the problems confronting the state declined to the mid-20 percent range.

Moreover, the seemingly aimless drift of state government and the perception that no one in charge has become an increasingly sore point. It is no surprise, then, that while he addresses his audience in restaurants, diners, bars and community centers in New Hampshire, a majority of New Jersey taxpayers and voters now believe he should choose between governor and candidate.

The two major legislative issues — renewal of the Transportation Trust Fund and hiring up the public pension and benefit plans to ensure long-term solvency — have been largely put aside, even though both are approaching crisis status.

Democrats support a gasoline tax increase and have indicated a willingness to waive reduction in other taxes — most notably the state's inheritance and estate taxes — to avert Trust Fund insolvency in June.

Christie's anti-tax position, driven largely by his national campaign, has effectively undermined effort to re-constitute the fund and progress has been nonexistent.

The same motives underlie his refusal to consider an additional funding for the pension plans, in addition to greater employee contribution and significant change in the manner in which the plans operate. Led by Senate President Stephen Weiner, legislative Democrats have been adamant in their demand that Christie live up to his commitment to increase the state's contribution on an equitable and timely basis before any concessions are considered.

