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BY CARL GOLDEN

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COMMENTARY

For county and municipal officials as well as board of education members reviewing the proposed state budget for fiscal year 2011 must be like flipping through a Stephen King mega-novel, each page bringing new horrors as they struggle to absorb the billion dollar plhave become widespread as local officials scramble to cope with the loss of unprecedented amou6(e)-5.6 4R7 9 d4 TJ 0 -2.1799 TD .0022 Tc .0005 Tw [(F

surcharge, setting up a bitter and protracted confrontation and the possibility of another shutdown of state government by failing to produce a budget by the June 30 deadline.

Democrats argue that the years' worth of relief the tax surcharge revenue provides to school districts will allow sufficient time to see them through this year and take full advantage of state-mandated cost cutting measures in 2011. The argument is bound to have some appeal, even to Republicans who are feeling the pressure from officials and taxpayers in their districts who will hold them accountable for property tax increases.

Christie has adamantly opposed the revival of the surcharge, calling it a tax increase that will further harm an economy in distress. He has also criticized it, with some justification, as an example of the kind of action which merely postpones facing up to problems and allows them to fester.

The Legislature has until the end of June to arrive at a consensus on the budget, three months guaranteed to be one of the most politically charged in recent memory.

Local officials may want to put aside the Stephen King novel they've been handed in favor of something a little more pleasant. Hopefully, it won't turn out to be Hamlet; everyone dies in the end.

Carl Golden served as press secretary to Govs. Kean and Whitman and is a senior contributing analyst with the William J. Hughes Center for Public Policy at Stockton College.

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