

# Christie to discuss Atlantic City and its challenges

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Gov. Christie will turn his attention Wednesday to Atlantic City, which is still reeling from casino closures that have put thousands out of work.



The governor was expected to attend a follow-up gathering to a summit meeting held two months ago that brought together state and local officials to discuss the Shore resort's future after four casinos closed this year - though Christie has not announced a strategy the state might pursue.

The situation in Atlantic City is just one of the pressing issues in New Jersey confronting Christie, who recently completed a cross-country tour campaigning for candidates as chairman of the Republican Governors Association.

How Christie handles the challenges could affect his political ambitions, analysts said.

Other persisting concerns include how to deal with the state's \$37 billion unfunded pension liability - Christie formed a commission that has yet to issue recommendations; Democrats have said the problem is Christie's failure to adequately fund the pension system - and how to pay for future transportation projects, with discussion revolving around the prospect of a gas tax increase.

Running for president as a governor is "a double-edged sword," said Dave Carney, who was Texas Gov. Rick Perry's political adviser when the Republican ran for president in 2012.

Able to point to accomplishments in their home states, governors "start a little bit ahead of everyone else," Carney said. "But they also have the possibility of being tripped up by their record."

A legislator such as Kentucky Sen. Rand Paul, for instance, would have to explain his votes in Congress, said John Weingart, director of the Center on the American Governor at Rutgers. But he would not face the same challenge as an executive weighing politically unpopular options to replenish the state's dwindling fund to repair roads and bridges, a task ahead of Christie.

Christie has said that "everything is on the table" when it comes to transportation, though he has said finding more revenue might not necessarily require a tax increase.

"It's easy to see how not doing that could be damaging to New Jersey," Weingart said of raising the gas tax. But "it's easy to see how doing that could be fodder for attacks against [Christie], particularly in Republican primaries."

New Jersey's economy also will likely be an issue if Christie runs for president. Weingart pointed to Michael Dukakis, a Democrat who ran for president in 1988 while serving as governor of Massachusetts.

Dukakis championed his state's economic performance as the "Massachusetts miracle." But his Republican opponent, who won the election, George H.W. Bush, found aspects of Dukakis' record to attack, calling it a "Massachusetts mirage."

More recently, former Massachusetts Gov. Mitt Romney, the Republican presidential nominee in 2012, faced attacks for a state law that required people to have health insurance - a component of President Obama's health-care law.

Under Christie, New Jersey's credit rating has been repeatedly downgraded. Though unemployment has fallen, job growth has trailed neighboring states.

The casino closures in Atlantic City - including the that of the luxury Revel Casino Hotel, which Christie had championed - cost about 8,000 jobs. A fifth casino, Trump Taj Mahal, is in danger of closing. On Monday, Senate President Stephen

Sweeney (D., Gloucester) proposed to stabilize the city's finances by letting casinos make payments in lieu of taxes for two years before requiring guaranteed tax payments for 15 years.

In another fiscal problem, a revenue shortfall that opened up this year spurred Christie to reduce the state's payments into the pension system, backtracking on a first-term pension reform deal that was one of his signature accomplishments.

Christie has said he will decide whether to run for president by early next year. If he does run, "the question is how skillfully he can exploit what a basket case New Jersey was before he got there," Carney said.

In an interview on *Fox News Sunday* last month, Christie made that argument while responding to a question about his economic record.

"You have to remember what we inherited five years ago," he said, referring to the tenure of Democratic Gov. Jon S. Corzine.

Christie then touted five rounds of balanced budgets - a requirement of New Jersey's constitution - as well as business tax cuts and private-sector job growth. Christie's backers emphasize his challenge working with a Democratic-controlled Legislature.

"I'm very enthusiastic about what he's done in a state that's as blue as can be," Ken Langone, the billionaire cofounder of Home Depot, said in a phone interview. Langone said his financial support for Christie would be "unequivocal" if the governor decides to run for president.

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