

## Questions loom over New Jersey's fiscal health

By ADAM C. UZIALKO 01-22-2015

Staff Writer

Gov. Chris Christie's State of the State address did not sufficiently outline a plan to overcome the economic challenges facing New Jersey in the eyes of some local officials.

State Assemblywoman Nancy Pinkin (D-Middlesex) said she was dissatisfied with the speech because she felt the governor did not meaningfully address the concerns of her constituents.

"I think it was a disappointment," Pinkin said. "He didn't discuss the issues that are on the minds of people in New Jersey."

The former East Brunswick councilwoman said those issues include Christie's decision to withhold a portion of state pension payments last year and the concerns surrounding the state's Transportation Trust Fund.

"We are a corridor state," Pinkin said, adding that ensuring the health of the Transportation Trust Fund was vital to strengthening the state economy. "One of the things that's always been good for our economy is to be at the center of all of this transportation. It's crucial to our economy."

John Weingart, associate director of the Eagleton Institute of Politics at Rutgers University, agreed that one of the most daunting challenges facing the New Jersey economy in 2015 is the Transportation Trust Fund, which he said would run out of money by summer if no action is taken.

"What the speech didn't do is give much of an outline of what [Christie] proposes to do ... in the coming year," Weingart said.

"This is a big problem in terms of funding the state's transportation needs," he added. "I had some expectation that it'd be addressed, but Gov. Christie didn't acknowledge that problem." Pinkin said the governor should have addressed his decision to withhold a large portion of state pension payments last year.

"He negotiated an agreement with the unions, and as soon as he got that agreement he then renegeed on it by not funding what he committed to funding," Pinkin said.

Also absent from the governor's address was any mention of New Jersey's credit being downgraded, she said.

In his address, the governor painted a picture of a New Jersey economy on the rise because of cuts in state spending.

"Today, we have balanced five budgets in a row, and we will balance a sixth this year," Christie said.

"We did it by cutting spending, shrinking government, and fundamentally reforming the way government operates," he added. "This administration believes today — and has always believed — that New Jersey and America will be a better place for middle-class families by shrinking the size of government."

Other local officials were more receptive to the governor's message. State Sen. Jennifer Beck (R-Monmouth) said there was much to be proud of in the state's recovery.

"The key element to the governor's State of the State address was taking a look at the progress we've made in the course of the last five years," Beck said. "While it isn't as great as we all had hoped, it is still laudable."

Beck noted that unemployment has dropped to 6.4 percent and that five consecutive budgets have been balanced without raising taxes.

In addition, Beck said private sector employment is growing, which she said is a promising sign for the health of the state economy.

"While private sector employment is not yet where we wish it was, it is far better than where we were five years ago," Beck said. "I think it's fair for him to take credit for slowly but surely helping the state navigate the challenges — including for those of us here in Monmouth County [as we] recover from [superstorm Sandy]."

Sayreville Mayor Kennedy O'Brien, who was in attendance for the annual address, said he believes Christie's philosophy represents a positive direction for the state.

"I think the governor is saying good things for the state of New Jersey," O'Brien said after the speech.

An economic renewal would be welcome news for Sayreville residents who are still struggling in the aftermath of the 2008 financial crisis, according to O'Brien, a Republican.

"[The financial crisis] was a life-changing recession. There are a great many people whose lives have been altered.

"This is like the victims of superstorm Sandy. ... Financially, they're wiped out. It's devastating," O'Brien said.

He also supported Christie's proposal to streamline services for residents struggling with addiction and mental health issues.

"I think the governor ... is being proactive and progressive," O'Brien said. "He's outlined a number of programs — particularly for addiction and mental illness — that will be a great help at the local level."

Beck agreed, adding that the governor has shown a serious interest in expanding outreach to residents struggling with addiction.

"I think it was interesting that he took so much time to talk about drug addiction, which is clearly a personal issue for him in terms of making sure the people get the services they need," Beck said.

Weingart said he believes Christie's speech served as a dry run for the national stage, suggesting the governor is considering a bid for the White House.

"He's been about as clear as you can be," Weingart said. "He's certainly planning on running."

Weingart said the governor's preparation of a leadership political action committee (PAC) in anticipation of a presidential bid is a necessary step at this stage if Christie is serious about throwing his hat in the ring in 2016.

"It's important at this point to get the tools in place to hit the ground running," he said. "Of course, you'll want to land [donors] and campaign professionals.

"The earlier you can start, the better."

