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N.J. Senators set to fight for budget priorities

By Jonathan Tamari

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If you see Sen. Joseph Vitale working in Trenton, chances are he's fighting to expand health coverage.

The Middlesex County Democrat has made universal health care his signature issue, moving the effort through the Statehouse step by step, including an increase in the state's FamilyCare program last year.

So when Gov. Corzine proposed rolling back the expansion to save money, Vitale balked. Last week he took a firm and, for fellow Democrats, potentially thorny stance: Restore the program or he will withhold his key vote for the budget.

Sen. Jeff Van Drew (D., Cape May) has similarly said he will not support the new budget unless more money is put into beach replenishment and several other programs that could be cut below minimums promised by law.

Van Drew and Vitale are the latest examples of what has become an annual tradition in Trenton: Democratic senators' drawing a line on their top priorities and threatening to stall the budget until their views are addressed.

With the sweeping spending law containing money for many of the governor's top priorities as well as those of just about every official and interest in the state, crucial budget votes give lawmakers leverage to flex their muscles for their causes, especially in the Senate, where Democrats hold a majority by just three votes.

"Every vote counts, literally," said Ingrid Reed, a political scientist at Rutgers' Eagleton Institute of Politics. "Let's face it, budgets are an awful lot of negotiations, and if you don't stand up and say what you want, you're not going to be part of the negotiation."

To lawmakers, their stands are a chance to fight for issues they feel strongly about. To administration officials trying to get a spending plan through, it sometimes feels like their budget is being held hostage.

Democrats' 23-17 Senate margin translates into individual influence for lawmakers who tie their votes to specific priorities.

Last year it was Majority Leader Stephen Sweeney (D., Gloucester) and Sen. Barbara Buono (D., Middlesex), who refused to back an important piece of the budget unless Corzine agreed to trim state worker benefits.

At the same time, urban lawmakers wouldn't vote for the spending plan unless the Legislature approved new school-construction money.

In 2006 Assembly Democrats resisted a sales-tax increase until half of it was set aside for property-tax rebates. The standoff with Corzine led to a government shutdown.

In 2002, the first year of Democratic control in the Senate, then-Sen. Sharpe James, a Democrat who was mayor of Newark, withheld his vote on a key budget bill while wrestling for support for a hockey arena in his city.

"The biggest difference in the Senate and Assembly is the closeness of the votes and the independence of the individual senators," said Van Drew, a former assemblyman. "That combined certainly gives you the opportunity, whether you are from the north, south, or central Jersey, to have your voice heard."

This year, though, the tradition is running into a grim reality of falling revenue. Tomorrow, Treasurer David Rousseau is scheduled to detail a new shortfall of about \$2 billion for the budget beginning July 1, meaning Corzine will seek more cuts even while lawmakers demand that he undo others.

"The governor welcomes any alternative ideas and hopes to stand together with our partners in the Legislature to make the right choices for all of New Jersey, and not divide ourselves over individual priorities," Corzine spokesman Robert Corrales said.

Buono, the Senate budget chair, said she expected fellow Democrats to be less insistent once they saw the full scope of the state's revenue problems. She said the prospects to restore "any cuts" were "dim."

"We have to put our egos aside and just do what's right for the state of New Jersey. That is holding the line on spending, cutting where we need to, and getting through this year," Buono said.

The shortfall has not stopped demands, however. Some lawmakers have already called for eliminating proposed co-pays on prescription drugs for the poor and HIV/AIDS patients. Others want money put back into a program promoting New Jersey produce. Some would like to restore funding for after-school programs.

Various lobbies have pressed for budget changes. Liberal groups criticized cuts to agencies such as the Department of Environmental Protection. Cuts to a program that helps the disabled brought a Statehouse protest. Opponents of cigarette taxes called on Corzine to drop the levy hikes from his budget.

Van Drew's positioning may pay off. Because beaches are important to so much of the state, and so many lawmakers, the Corzine administration is considering restoring funding for the program.

Van Drew said beaches are crucial to Shore communities and a huge piece of New Jersey tourism.

"It's life and death in my district," Van Drew said.

He said he also wouldn't support a budget that funded programs for the arts, tourism, and training emergency medical technicians below levels promised by law.

Vitale said last week that he couldn't stand by while health-care programs were reduced. He proposed several options to help restore enough money to the budget to reverse the health-care cuts.

"Certain funding requests are more than just line items in a budget," he said.

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