
The Star-Ledger

christie's chosen few

Thursday, November 12, 2009

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STATEHOUSE

After running for office vowing to "turn Trenton upside down," Gov.-elect Chris Christie yesterday tapped a transition team that knows the Statehouse inside out, from a Democratic state senator and former state treasurer to longtime Republican operatives.

Before he takes office Jan. 19, Christie's inner circle will help assemble his administration, sift through mounds of information from the outgoing governor and give voice to key constituencies across the state. The 10 transition leaders will also provide policy guidance to the Republican governor-elect, a rookie in state government after spending seven years as New Jersey's top federal prosecutor.

"It's a lot more than ceremonial," said Woodbridge Mayor John McCormac, a Democrat who was treasurer under governors James E. McGreevey and Richard Codey. "There's 15 departments to learn about in the next 60 days, so you have to have people who know Trenton to give you a head start."

In selecting McCormac and state Sen. Sandra Cunningham (D-Hudson), Christie underscored the bipartisan signals he has labored to send in the days since defeating Democratic Gov. Jon Corzine. When Christie takes office, no law, budget or high-level appointment will be able to pass without the approval of the Democrat-controlled Legislature.

Christie also is taking pains to avoid some of Corzine's early missteps in failing to build relationships with the Trenton establishment, a mistake that handicapped his goals, advisers and political experts said.

"From the beginning, Corzine did not organize an administration in a way that had the capacity to be as effective as it should've been," said John Weingart, associate director of the Eagleton Institute of Politics at Rutgers University. "It would make sense that he (Christie) would try to do better."

Weingart called Christie's group small enough to "make a real contribution," as opposed to some past transitions that seemed "unwieldy." McGreevey, for example, named 88 people as his top transition team members in 2001.

"Every governor tries with their transition team both for symbolism and for substance, and I think some of the previous ones may have tilted too far toward symbolism at the expense of substance," Weingart said.

Christie chose policy veterans in Susan Cole, the Montclair State University president who has worked with the last five administrations; Alfred Koeppel, the former head of utility Public Service Electric & Gas who worked on transition teams for Corzine, McGreevey and former Republican Gov. Christie Whitman; Debra DiLorenzo, the longtime head of the Chamber of Commerce of Southern New Jersey; and Jon Hanson, a real estate executive who served on transition teams for former Gov. Tom Kean, Christie's mentor.

The governor-elect also made room for loyalists: his chief strategist, Mike DuHaime; his campaign chairman, Sen. Joseph Kyriillos (R-Monmouth); and a top vote-producer, Ocean County Republican chairman George Gilmore.

The group is headed by David Samson, a lawyer who served as McGreevey's attorney general. The transition team will gather for the first time today, when Christie also will meet privately with Corzine. Other committees are being assembled to tackle specific policy areas, not all of which are represented on the economy- and business-heavy leadership team.

"What I've been trying to do over the last eight days -- besides catch up on some sleep -- is also to make sure that I get some very, very good people around me," Christie told reporters after a Veterans Day event in Holmdel yesterday. "The people of New Jersey know that we're in the middle of really difficult times, and we're going to have to make tough choices."

Not everyone was pleased with Christie's decisions.

Rick Shaftan, a political strategist who led conservative activist Steve Lonegan's campaign against Christie in the GOP primary, called the makeup of the transition team a "total insult" and decried the presence of prominent Democrats.

"They did not vote to bring back the McGreevey-Corzine team," Shaftan said. "This isn't a transition; it's a continuation."

Christie also is finalizing ethics rules for transition members and will require paid employees to abide by the same code as state employees, spokeswoman Maria Comella said. The rules, among other things, ban employees from accepting anything of value offered to influence them and prohibit them from having any financial interests that are in substantial conflict with their duties.

Comella said the transition team's leaders are volunteers, while other staff members are paid. The transition budget is \$250,000.

One task for Christie's advisers is preparing plans to deal with an \$8 billion budget deficit -- including the option of declaring a fiscal emergency, Christie said yesterday. He cautioned that no decisions have been made. Declaring a state of emergency could give Christie expansive powers over rules involving state worker layoffs.

Christie also said he will voluntarily follow pay-to-play limits on fundraising for his inauguration, although it is not required. He said leftover funds will be donated to charity.

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