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## Senate president Sweeney holds on to Glouco freeholder post for now

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Now that he is top dog in the New Jersey Legislature, Senate President Stephen M. Sweeney said he will leave his position as Gloucester County freeholder -- but he won't say when.

"I gave myself a deadline of 2010 and I will not go beyond that," said the West Deptford Democrat, "but when in 2010, I can't say."

Sweeney said he had "unfinished business" to take care of before he stepped down from his county position.

"It would be so good for me to walk away right now, politically, but governmentally it is not the right thing to do," he said. "I have things I am working on that I think are important to the county."

That may ring hollow to New Jersey residents, said Patrick Murray, director of Monmouth University Polling Institute.

"Voters can ask, 'Why are you the only person who can finish that business?,' Murray said.

Murray said every elected official leaves office -- some unwillingly -- with unfinished business.

Murray suspects that the unfinished business Sweeney is referring to is "How do we keep this seat Democratic?"

If Sweeney, who has been a freeholder since 1997, leaves his post before early September, the Democratic Party could appoint someone to fill his seat, but they would have to fight to keep it in an unexpired term election this November, said Gloucester County Clerk Jim Hogan.

However, if he leaves after that date, the Democrats could fill the seat with someone who would stay in place until Sweeney's term expired in December of 2011, Hogan said.

"There is going to be a major political calculation in this because this is not a safe seat for Democrats," Murray said.

Up to last year it was safely Democratic, Murray said, but during the last election Gloucester County voters elected a Republican assemblyman to Trenton, political newcomer Domenick DiCicco.

Murray said without a known quantity like Sweeney on the ballot, there is a good chance for a Republican pickup.

"The party bosses are going to read the tea leaves for awhile to figure out how best they can hold onto this seat," he said, "and that's when Steve Sweeney will leave."

Multiple officer holder

The second week of January, Sweeney actually held three offices at one time. When then-Gov. Jon S. Corzine went on a Switzerland vacation, Sweeney took on the reins of acting governor. He signed bills and proclamations in the governor's stead, but also served at the same time as Senate president and freeholder director.

Bill Fey, a leader with the Gloucester County Republicans, said dual office holding, or "double-dipping," is wrong because "at some point, something's gotta give," he said.

"To me, I don't think that one person can do the job of three people," he said.

Ingrid Reed, director of the New Jersey Project at the Eagleton Institute of Politics at Rutgers University, said she was surprised to hear Sweeney is planning to step down because he seemed comfortable holding on to two positions, she said.

"I think this is a moment where everything came together and I suspect he was finding it a challenge to pay attention to his home count," Reed said.

She said that Sweeney probably also sensed that dual office holding was an important issue in New Jersey, but was waiting to discuss it with his party before he stepped down.

When the September 2007 legislation to prevent dual office holding went into effect in February 2008, 19 lawmakers held positions both in the Legislature and local elected posts.

The number is now 11, with newly elected Camden Mayor Dana Redd stepping down from her state Senate post following her mayoral victory. That number still includes Assemblyman John Burzichelli, D-Paulsboro, mayor of Paulsboro.

Sweeney said he didn't vote for the legislation because "I really believe that you're insulting voters," he said, adding that voters know he holds both offices and have re-elected him. "People know what they want and what they don't like."

#### Volunteer service

Sweeney, who was elected to the state Senate in 2001, said he donates his freeholder salary to charity, doesn't take government health care and is trying to opt out of pension payments.

"If I don't take pay, how can you criticize me for serving as a volunteer," Sweeney said.

As Senate president, Sweeney gets a salary bump of a third more over the \$49,000 paid to legislators.

Sweeney also works as a regional director for a national ironworkers union, which he said provides his health care.

"It's not illegal, it's that the optics are not particularly good," said Richard Harris, political science professor and director of the Sen. Walter Rand Institute at Rutgers in Camden. "Especially given the recent political history in New Jersey in the last five years or so, particularly at a time when there is such a severe fiscal crisis in the state, anything that would raise resentment or skepticism on the part of voters is not a good thing."

As for something's gotta give, Sweeney said it's usually his family life, because he wakes up at 5 a.m. and comes home around 10 p.m. on an average day.

"I'm a workaholic," Sweeney said. "Some people have hobbies, they like golf and different things. I don't have hobbies. I work."

"It's not going to get any easier, the Senate presidency is a job that's going to take a great deal of time," Sweeney said. "What people don't understand is I know I have to leave."

He defends his position as freeholder director, saying it was the choice of his colleagues on the Gloucester County freeholder board.

"It's a great honor and I guess that's how I am going to finish it off," he said.

Sweeney said there are other freeholders who could jump in to take over projects, but he is so deeply involved with them, they would be hard to hand off.

"I have people on the board who are extremely capable and will do just fine without me," he said.

Reed said Sweeney played a very strong management role in Gloucester County and was curious who would take his place.

"I have no idea whether he has groomed people to replace him," Reed said. "But that is what a good manager

would do."

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