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Atlantic City takeover another example of Christie's governing style

By Maya Rao

Inquirer Staff Writer

Gov. Christie issued a stern message to Atlantic City in January after a state comptroller's audit uncovered \$23 million in municipal government waste: Get your act together, or I'll do it for you.

Two days after his six-month anniversary of taking office, the governor delivered on his ultimatum, endorsing state oversight of the resort's casino district to counter ineptitude at City Hall.

Stressing the need for immediate action, Christie on Wednesday set a July 1 deadline for making the new district clean and safe.

It was an illustration of Christie's general approach to governance in his first half-year: Take a problem that has dogged New Jersey for years. Offer tough love in sound bites that sometimes belie the complexity of the issue. Set a rapid timetable to fix it. And aggressively use executive power to get results.

That path can be seen in his attempts to reform property taxes, affordable-housing policies, the pension system, the state's top court, and more.

And while repeatedly saying Trenton must get out of the way, Christie has unabashedly wielded executive power more than any other governor in recent memory.

"Is he one of the most powerful governors in New Jersey's history? Yes. . . . He has consolidated the power that the constitution provided to the Governor's Office and used it in a far more effective way than his recent predecessors have," said John Weingart, associate director of the Eagleton Institute of Politics at Rutgers University.

Speaking about Atlantic City at the New Meadowlands Stadium on Wednesday, Christie said New Jersey has had eight years of timid leadership that always looked to please everyone.

"You have to be bold," he said. "We're in difficult times. We have to turn the state around, and I'm willing to do that."

Concerns about a state power grab, balanced by support for strong action, date to the earliest days of Christie's governance.

Consider the opening lines of a legal challenge to Executive Order 12, which Christie signed three weeks into his term.

The order suspended for 90 days the powers of the state Council on Affordable Housing (COAH) to enforce regulations that towns must provide low- and moderate-income housing. A task force established by the executive order was to use that time to develop recommendations for reforming the system.

"This matter concerns an unprecedented attempt by Governor Chris Christie to expand the power of the governor in contravention of explicit legislative policy. . . . This sweeping assertion of executive power has no basis in New Jersey law and sets a dangerous precedent for the entire operation of state government," reads the legal filing by the Fair Share Housing Center of Cherry Hill.

The appellate court struck down the portion of the executive order that suspended COAH - a widely criticized agency created under 1985 legislation - but allowed the task force to continue.

Christie was undeterred, later coming out with a proposal to return affordable-housing decisions to the local level and mostly remove Trenton from the equation. The administration pressed for rapid passage by the end of June, with Senate cooperation, but the Assembly put its foot down last month. Members of the lower house questioned why legislation for such a complex problem should be rushed through without more evaluation.

Christie, who pledged while running for office to gut COAH, has been using this approach to make progress on his list of campaign promises at a furious rate.

The governor, who pledged to remake the state Supreme Court, made an unprecedented decision in May not to reappoint Justice John E. Wallace Jr., though Wallace would have had to retire in two years anyway because of age limits. Christie called the court "out of control."

Christie, who ran for office pledging no new taxes, wielded his oft-used veto pen when Democratic lawmakers approved a bill reinstating a so-called millionaire's tax to offset the pain of budget cuts.

He set a rapid timetable for tackling the property-tax issue as soon as he signed the \$29.4 billion budget, demanding that legislators convene over the July Fourth weekend. Christie noted that residents don't get a vacation from property taxes and asked why lawmakers should.

The result was a 2 percent cap signed into law July 13 - one that can be overridden only with voter approval. Pension costs, health care, debt service, and states of emergency would all be exempt. Still unclear is how the cap will account for existing multiyear union contracts with raises of 3 and 4 percent.

Christie has emphasized that the cap is just one of 33 proposals in a "tool kit" to drive down local government spending - proposals that lawmakers are studying this summer. But some local officials were disappointed that the cap law was passed ahead of the changes to arbitration, civil service, and various mandates that drive up taxes.

"It was almost run like a political campaign: This urgency, this absolute urgency, to get this cap law signed before the management reforms and the mandate relief initiatives would be signed. . . . If these management reforms are not adopted in an expeditious fashion, it's going to mean draconian cuts in services and an avalanche of layoffs," said Bill Dressel, executive director of the New Jersey League of Municipalities.

State Sen. Kevin O'Toole (R., Passaic) said Christie governs as he campaigned.

"He is a man of tremendous action," O'Toole said.

Still, residents are skeptical that they will see a solution to New Jersey's high property taxes.

After the passage of a 2 percent cap on property-tax increases, only 12 percent of the respondents to a Monmouth University/Gannett New Jersey Press Media poll said they believed the limit would fix the underlying problems that cause high taxes. Nearly three-quarters said the problems would persist.

Many residents also will pay higher taxes because their towns and school districts could not offset Christie's cuts to state aid, even though some reduced spending.

And with the ink barely dry on the cap law, a consultant for the state issued a report recommending an 11.7 percent increase in premiums for municipalities and a 5.7 percent hike for school districts that participate in the State Health Benefits Plan.

Dressel said tax caps are softballs, describing many of the other "tool kit" proposals as not new but more difficult to enact because they have been killed by special interest groups or unions in the past.

He said he wished Christie would use more executive power to get those measures through.

The Republican governor has more freedom than his predecessors to chart a bold course. Voters rejected an incumbent from the same party that had dominated the legislative and executive branch for eight years. And a plunging economy offers Christie a reason to trim spending while also creating a heightened sense of urgency.

From Day 1, Christie also has been bypassing the Democratic Legislature by using the power of executive orders, such as the one on affordable housing, more than any other governor in at least several decades.

The exception was State Sen. Richard J. Codey (D., Essex), who served as acting governor in 2005, though his slight edge over Christie is an insignificant gauge of executive power when accounting for their content.

"It's there. Use it," Codey said of executive power.

"I think he has the right message," he said. "I think at times he sends it the wrong way, in terms of the language, the harshness of it."

Christie's most recent executive order extends by one year the life of the advisory commission whose recommendations on greater state involvement in Atlantic City he endorsed this week.

As the Atlantic City announcements showed, Christie is taking no rest from pounding the pressing nature of the state's problems to set his agenda. Saying the previous administration dawdled for four years, Christie stressed that the resort's turnaround could not wait.

Unlike Atlantic City's wayward City Hall, the additional layer of government proposed for overseeing the casino district is one the executive office can control.