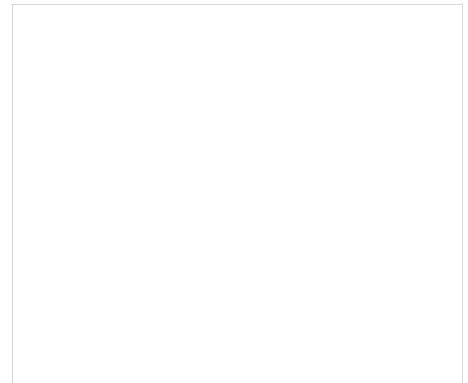


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AP PHOTO / RICH SCHULTZ

Governor Christie delivering his budget address before a joint session of the Legislature at the State House Feb. 26.

recommendations.

and by warning that if the federal government backed off its promise to fund the expansion at the levels it promised, he would not hesitate to pull the state out of the program entirely.

Christie's likely Democratic opponent this fall, Middlesex County State Sen. Barbara Buono, tore into the governor's budget by pointing out that it provided nothing in the way of job creation or reduction of the 9.6 percent unemployment rate, the highest in the immediate region and a full two points above the national average.

Christie, though, holds the upper hand. His platform is larger and his megaphone bigger than that of the Democratic opposition. He will make even greater use of his town hall meetings to promote his budget and agenda.

He has consistently portrayed himself as someone who came to office with a mandate to

