

# OPINION: SWEENEY STARTS TO GATHER STRENGTH FOR POSSIBLE GOVERNOR BID

CARL GOLDEN | DECEMBER 2, 2013

Senate president is already making the right moves to clear the field of other candidates, and his political allies are lending a hand



When Senate President Steve Sweeney took a victory lap in celebration of the Democrats' maintaining their legislative majorities, it served also as the start of an effort to cast himself as a credible candidate for his party's gubernatorial nomination in 2017 and to establish an inevitably environment -- otherwise known as "clearing the field."

He received credit and praise for fending off Republican challenges and preserving the party's 24-16 edge in the Senate, despite Gov. Chris Christie's 22-point victory over state Sen. Barbra Buono.

He was one of the media's most sought after legislators at the State League of Municipalities conference in Atlantic City last week, and the reception he sponsored during the conference was standing room only.

He followed that up with a visit to Hudson County, where he accompanied state Sen. Brian Stack on a turkey distribution sojourn in Union City.

In the same week, Sweeney's political guidance counselor, South Jersey leader George Norcross -- without prompting -- announced he's a firm supporter of Essex County Executive Joe DiVincenzo, a warning to potential DiVincenzo primary opponents that they faced his formidable organizing and fund-raising capabilities should any of them move on the county executive next year.

It was also Norcross who engineered the selection of Essex County Executive Joe DiVincenzo as the party's gubernatorial candidate. He is heavily endorsed by the party's political leadership.

Some in the party continue to resent Stack and DiVincenzo for endorsing Christie and Blagojevich. Sweeney for failing to go all out for Buono. Political grudges usually fade with time and often, in the interest of achieving election victories. Sweeney, while stopping short of a full endorsement, was nonetheless seen as one of the troika along with Stack and DiVincenzo who sabotaged Buono even though it was clear her campaign was doomed from the outset.

There may be some egos to be stroked and favors promised to smooth over any residual animosity not only over Sweeney's lack of enthusiasm for Buono but over his incessant appearance and compliments for Christie during the campaign.

The alliances formed between Norcross and the Hudson/Essex party organizations constitute a formidable powerbase, capable of clearing the field and averting any serious primary election challenge to a Sweeney candidacy.

For the Senate president, though, history is not on his side.

Of the 11 governors elected since the adoption in 1947 of the state Constitution, none came directly from the Legislature. Several served in either house but left prior to their election while many sitting legislators failed in attempts to use their experience as a springboard.

Sweeney will preside over the Senate for the next four years, wielding the broad authority of his office to decide which bills will receive consideration, which will be consigned to a committee