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"Stay the course" may mean collision

Christie's education reform agenda will be tough sell

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"Stay the course" is not exactly the ringing-to-the-rafters rallying cry calculated to send adrenaline surging through the veins of the body politic, but Gov. Chris Christie made it clear in his first State of the State address to the Legislature last week that it will guide him through what is certain to be a highly charged midterm election year ahead.

True to his pledge in the days leading up to his speech that it would not be the customary wish list of new programs and initiatives for the Legislature to chew over, Christie focused on three themes — fiscal discipline, public pension overhaul and reform of the public education system — all of which dominated the policy debate in his first year in office.

He placed each of these issues in the larger context of the very survival of the state, its economic growth and vitality, and the well-being of future generations.

State of the State speeches are always conciliatory in tone, peppered with expressions of working together in a bipartisan manner and placing the public interest ahead of all else.

Christie observed that tradition, but his remarks were a thinly disguised warning to potential opponents that he was committed to seeing his reform agenda through to enactment despite the formidable forces arrayed against him.

The fiscal discipline he referenced will become clearer when his proposed budget is submitted to the Legislature late next month, but the few hints he dropped in last week's speech suggested it will be his second consecutive shared pain and sacrifice document.

There will be no tax increases, he promised, and spending will be brought into line with resources through reductions alone. The Democratic leadership of the Legislature will find it extremely difficult to overcome the governor's you-can't-spend-what-you-don't-have approach and will, in

all probability, provide the minimum number of votes to approve the budget to avoid the public relations disaster of being held responsible for a government shutdown.

The clash of political wills will involve his efforts toward fundamental changes in the pension and benefits system and revolutionary changes in public education.

The Democratic leadership attempted to get the jump on Christie on the pension issue by announcing its own reform package a few days in advance of the governor's speech. That may have sown the seeds of compromise and smoothed the path to enactment.

Christie avoided portraying public employees as self-absorbed obstructionists standing in the way of reform. Rather, he warned that without decisive action to, among other steps, increase employee contributions and raise the retirement age, the system would collapse, leaving current and future retirees with no benefits.

While the two plans differ, the Democrats demonstrated their understanding of the pension system's precarious situation as well as their willingness to take dramatic steps to rescue it. The cap on property tax rate increases and reforms in the binding arbitration system are law today because of accommodations reached between Christie and Democrats. Pension reform seems ripe for a similar outcome.

As likely as agreement might be on this issue, the

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