



Everything Jersey

The real Gov. Chris Christie budget: property-tax hikes to the horizon

By Paul Mulshine/The Star Ledger

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Gov. Chris Christie speaks at the annual Charter School Association conference after delivering his budget address.

Back in the Nixon administration, Attorney General **John Mitchell** offered these words of wisdom to journalists: "Watch what we do, not what we say."

The Mitchell mantra is quite useful in analyzing the budget that the Christie administration presented last week.

During the campaign last year, Christie promised to "slash state spending" so he could free up dollars for property tax relief, among other things. But his first budget does the exact opposite. State spending goes up — and so will your property taxes, thanks to the tax relief he's cutting.

Under the last budget put together by **Jon Corzine**, the categories that represent actual spending by the state government — governmental operations as well as employee benefits, rent, etc. — totaled \$5.7 billion. Christie is increasing that spending to \$6 billion.

Last week, however, he boasted that his budget is lower than Corzine's last budget. How can that be? Simple. He slashed state aid and grants. This is an old trick. A governor can always balance his budget by forcing the towns and schools to raise property taxes.

That's what Christie did. But he did it in a way that even a liberal Democrat couldn't have dreamed up. Corzine never would have had the nerve to come up with a state school-aid formula that zeroes out aid for 59 suburban school districts. But the "conservative" Christie did. He even cut his own county's aid by a third — and Morris didn't get much to begin with.

"Our governor has told us that he's cutting school aid," said Assemblyman **Joe Malone** of Bordentown. "That means to every suburban school district your taxes are going up."

Actually, Malone said that back in October, when Corzine was proposing some relatively minor cuts in school aid. But what the Republican Assembly budget officer said then remains true today. Local property taxes will skyrocket under the Christie budget.

Yesterday in the Statehouse, Republican legislators were still in shock at the numbers that were unveiled during the governor's St. Patrick's Day Massacre. On March 17, the day after the Guv's budget spiel, the state released the aid figures that will form the basis for school budgets to be voted on April 20.

That was the first time lawmakers learned of the devastating effect on the suburbs.

"Why even have a legislature?" state Sen. **Mike Doherty** of Warren County asked. He and other Republicans said they were blindsided.

"When people came out for Chris Christie, what they were voting for wasn't this," Doherty said "It's unacceptable. It's gotta change."

It's gotta. But will it? If not, suburban taxpayers can forget the property tax promises Christie made last year during the GOP primary. In one press conference, Christie said he would free up state aid for the suburbs by cutting the outsized amounts that go to the cities.

"We'll fix the system in those cities and save the money that's being wasted there now and then you'll be able to equalize aid across the board," said candidate Christie. When asked how many years that would take, he said, "With me there, it's going to happen in less than four, I guarantee that."

The numbers guarantee the exact opposite. The first Christie budget makes the suburban-urban imbalance even worse. Under the liberal Corzine administration, the 31 largely urban Abbott school districts got 55.6 percent of the state aid. Under the self-proclaimed conservative Christie, the proportion going to the Abbott districts exceeds 60 percent for the first time. The 550 remaining districts have to fight for the crumbs. And that's what they'll be doing for the next four years, hoping against hope to get back to the state-aid levels of the Corzine era.

As for Christie, he may not be giving them property tax relief, but he's great at giving excuses. In that budget speech, Christie blamed the school aid cuts on Corzine. But the numbers say otherwise. That aid comes out of the property tax relief fund, which is made up of the entire income tax and a half-cent of the sales tax. And that fund is expected to lag just a bit behind where it was at this time last year when Christie was promising property tax relief.

If Christie had slashed state spending as he promised, he'd have plenty of money for both state school aid and those property tax rebates he canceled — breaking another campaign promise.

So watch what he does, not what he says. The numbers don't lie. As for politicians, that's another matter.

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