

Will it be back to business in Jersey? Business leaders are eagerly awaiting Christie's next move



Gov. Chris Christie has nearly two years remaining on his term in office

By Andrew George, February 15, 2016

Gov. Chris Christie tried to take his departure from the race to be president in stride last week.

“I have both won elections that I was supposed to lose and I’ve lost elections I was supposed to win, and what that means is you never know what will happen,” he said. “That is both the magic and the mystery of politics — you never quite know when which is going to happen, even when you think you do.”

That sort of sums up how many business leaders feel about his return to being the state’s full-time governor this week: There’s no predicting what he will do.

Opinions of some of the state’s top leaders — most of whom requested anonymity because of the sensitivity of the question — varied.

He may look to rebuild his legacy and get a lot done, some said.

He may take out his disappointment on the Legislature, others said.

One offered a third viewpoint: "I think he'll just wait around a few months and then be back out there, supporting and stumping for whoever is the likely nominee."

Polling data over the last few months has indicated that Christie will be coming back to near record-low favorability and job approval ratings.

Though Christie once noted that he "can walk and chew gum at the same time" in response to whether he'd be able to govern New Jersey and simultaneously run for president, the idea that he has spent the bulk of the past year in New Hampshire campaigning as opposed to managing the state has left many with bad tastes in their mouths.

Krista Jenkins, director of the Fairleigh Dickinson University PublicMind Poll and associate professor of political science at the school, feels the governor was hurt by the campaign.

"I don't think people, by and large, buy the argument that you can do both at the same time," she said.

So what will he do now?

Ashley Koning, assistant director of Rutgers University's Eagleton Center for Public Interest Polling, says only time will tell.

"It's kind of anybody's guess which governor we're going to get back and how he's going to act," she said.

The answer, she said, should come quickly.

"The Transportation Trust Fund and the proposed gas tax to replenish it could serve as a telltale sign of what's to come," she said.

Of course, getting that done may not be so easy.

While it would behoove Christie, the governor, to negotiate a deal with state Democrats on how best to fund the depleted TTF going forward, candidate Christie has spent the last few months signing anti-tax pledges and telling New Hampshire residents and the media that the TTF is not actually broke.

But Koning also noted that, with the right focus, Christie might be able to walk the line between ensuring his legacy in New Jersey and preparing himself for a political future outside of the state.

"It could be a make or break for him," Koning said.

“If he refocuses on New Jersey and decides to actually commit to get stuff done ... if he continuously shows that on a variety of issues and gets back to why he became popular in the first place, that can propel him for something good in the future.”

John Boyd Jr., principal of the Princeton-based Boyd Co., said the future is now and the governor needs to quickly get back on his game.

To Boyd, too many issues are on the table.

Between paid sick leave, a proposed \$15 minimum wage and the ongoing pension payment dispute, Boyd said there is no shortage of topics worrisome to the business community that are in need of Christie’s opposition.

“There are a number of antibusiness policies on the horizon and no doubt concerns about Christie’s weakened popularity in the Garden State,” Boyd said.

“While job creators and businesses in New Jersey are concerned about a return to the tax-and-spend days of (former Gov.) Jon Corzine ... most hope that with the governor leaving the campaign trail and returning to New Jersey, he will be able to improve his popularity and work to prevent a return to those antibusiness ‘bad old days.’ ”

Others hope Christie doesn’t get involved at all.

John Currie, chairman of the Democratic State Committee, feels his time is done.

“It’s time for him to grab a mop and attend to the countless messes he created and then avoided for so long,” he said. “Better yet, he should do what a majority of New Jersey wants him to do: resign.”