

OPINION: NOT TOO SOON TO CALL THE MURPHY AGENDA A FAILURE

CARL GOLDEN | MAY 15, 2018

A new budget must be ratified in six weeks, and there's already talk of government shutdown – with the governor's own party controlling the Legislature



Carl Golden

It's the middle of May, the weather has turned pleasant, trees are in full leaf, patio furniture has reappeared, backyard pools have been uncovered, and Gov. Phil Murphy's legislative agenda is in shambles.

Let us count the ways:

- Increase the income tax on those earning \$1 million a year and above. No.
- Restore the state sales tax to seven percent from the current 6.6 percent and extend it to services such as Uber, Lyft, and Airbnb. No.
- Legalize possession of small amounts of marijuana for personal use. No.
- Fully fund the formula for state aid to local school districts. No.
- Eliminate the Partnership for Assessment of Readiness for College and Careers (PARCC) standardized test in public schools. No.
- Expand public preschool. No.
- Abolish tuition at county colleges. No.
- Designate New Jersey a sanctuary state and curtail cooperation with federal authorities in arresting undocumented immigrants. No.

There hasn't been a comparably ambitious, left of center – almost utopian – agenda in recent memory, nor has one so quickly crashed on the rocks of political and fiscal reality.

Murphy, of course, was aware that neither Senate President Steve Sweeney (D-Gloucester) nor Assembly Speaker Craig Coughlin (D-Middlesex) supported his millionaires tax proposal, but when the two leaders double-teamed him last week to inform him they did not support his sales-tax increase and extension either, his agenda collapsed before his eyes.

For, without the revenue from those two proposals – estimated at over \$1 billion – fulfilling the remainder of his agenda is impossible.

Grass goes up in smoke

His third principal revenue-raiser – legalizing marijuana and imposing a tax on sales – confronts an equally dim future in the Legislature as well. While it enjoys some support, it's clear that it falls short of a majority at the moment, effectively foreclosing any revenue stream until sometime next year, if at all.

With little more than six weeks until a new budget must be in place, the potential for an impasse arose, along with speculation about a possible government shutdown if a resolution remains elusive.

The governor always appears to be one step behind events, reacting to them rather than wielding the power of his office and its far-reaching messaging ability to direct and control them.

Critics attribute his failure to seize the initiative to a lack of experience – he’s never held elective office – and to being surrounded by a staff equally inexperienced dealing with the charged political environment and self-interest crosscurrents that dominate budget negotiations in particular.

Ignorance is bliss

Murphy also appears remarkably sanguine about the brewing potential for a stalemate, dismissive of the chattering class’s talk of power struggles, constitutional crises, and who would bear the brunt of the blame for a shutdown. His seeming nonchalance is, his critics argue, further evidence that he’s yet to fully understand the insider intricacies crucial to a successful outcome.

How else to explain that an administration not yet six months old and with a Legislature controlled by its own party is forced into answering questions about a government shutdown?

The governor and the legislative leaders all understand the disastrous consequences of forcing a closure of government offices and functions and understand that even talk of such an eventuality is damaging, calling into question their ability to govern in a smooth and coherent fashion.

Sweeney and Coughlin, though, hold the stronger hand, understanding that they will be perceived as guarding against tax increases and favoring greater spending restraint while the governor will be in a position of rationalizing a failure to raise taxes as a reason to shut down government.

While he campaigned vigorously on each of the issues that form the core of his agenda, his landslide election victory should not be misconstrued as an overwhelming voter validation of his ideas. His victory was a thorough repudiation of his predecessor rather than a clear-cut mandate for him and his policies.

He has, through executive orders or signing legislation, directed equal pay for equal work and paid sick leave, ordered automatic voter registration, and tightened regulations on gun ownership.

As desirable as these actions were for many, they are of relatively little consequence viewed against the background of his larger and more impactful agenda.

He has also made the state a party to several lawsuits against President Donald Trump and the Republican Congress, moves designed more for news conference value than for any genuine prospect of success. It’s like coloring Easter eggs in July: It might be fun and make one feel good, but it’s a waste of time and money.

A government shutdown is, of course, in no one’s best interest, and it is likely the fairly stark differences dominating the debate at the moment will be overcome.

And, while Murphy continues to exude optimism, it’s certain that he’ll be forced to surrender his agenda and delay the bulk of it until next year, at least.

As has become his custom, Murphy dipped into his sack of metaphors to describe the current situation.

It was, he said, only the fourth inning of the game and there was a great deal of playing time remaining.

If that is, indeed, so, the administration had better have some strong arms in its bullpen.

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