

Murphy's campaign promises run into fiscal and political reality, says Carl Golden

Carl Golden For The Press Feb 7, 2018

Plank by plank, Gov. Phil Murphy's campaign platform is being dismantled.

The latest promise to hit the wall is his pledge to legalize marijuana for recreational use. It has encountered growing resistance in the Legislature and at the local level as well. A handful of municipalities have enacted ordinances or promised to do so to ban establishments selling the drug.

At least six Democratic senators have promised to cast negative votes on any legalization bill and Assembly Speaker Craig Coughlin, D-Middlesex, is decidedly cool to the idea.

While a certain amount of legislative pushback was anticipated, perhaps the most significant statement of opposition came from the pulpit, a treatise by Bishop Jethro C. James Jr., senior pastor of Paradise Baptist Church, Newark, and president of the Newark/North Jersey Committee of Black Churchmen.

James, a member of the governor's transition team, was unsparing in his criticism of the proposal.

Legalization, the bishop wrote, would create a "big marijuana" industry that "would only further hurt minority communities by bringing more drugs into our neighborhoods and our homes. The marijuana and the alcohol industries routinely target vulnerable communities as their profit centers."

He went on: "In states where marijuana use is legal, we've seen significant increases in youth pot use, homelessness and workers failing drug tests. The number of car accidents from those driving under the influence of marijuana has skyrocketed and the black market is flourishing."

He wasn't finished: "In legalized states, the mostly white male marijuana industry is now targeting black and Latino communities in hopes of creating a new customer base of heavy users."

He took a shot at Murphy's core argument — eliminating the huge disparity between minority offenders incarcerated for possession and whites jailed for similar offenses.

Data from the Colorado Department of Public Safety, he said, revealed that in the two years after legalization there, the number of Hispanic and African American youths arrested for marijuana-related offenses rose 29 and 58 percent respectively while white youths arrested for identical crimes fell 8 percent.

"Too many people of color are locked up for low-level crimes every year," he said, "but legalization is not the answer and would only make the problem worse."

He called for criminal justice reforms, enhanced training of law enforcement and greater compassion for those suffering from substance abuse.

"Make no mistake," he said, "legalizing recreational marijuana is not social justice — it is social injustice."

A powerful and damning indictment, to be sure.

The beginning of the end of Murphy's suggested social experiment is but the latest of his campaign promises to crumble under the weight of political reality.

His marquee campaign promise — increasing the tax on incomes over \$1 million — has been taken off life support and, even if it survives, it's unclear when, or if, it will be considered by the Legislature.

He recently conceded that an increase in the minimum wage to \$15 per hour — a surefire crowd pleaser at his campaign rallies — is in the "conceptual stage."

Translation: Don't look for a raise in the paycheck anytime soon. (A New Jersey Policy Perspective study last spring estimated 1.2 million workers — 28 percent of the workforce — would benefit by 2024 under a \$15 per hour rate.)

He has also modified his position on the state's controlling role in Atlantic City's government. He pledged to end it, but now has suggested that the state and the city become partners in conducting municipal affairs.

Translation: We're here for a while.

Fully funding the aid to local education formula and shoring up the public pension system — two more campaign pledges — seem highly unlikely as well, simply because the state lacks the hundreds of millions of dollars for either one.

It is, of course, not unusual for a newly elected governor to recalibrate once in office and modify or abandon promises made in the heat of a campaign. It seems, though, that Murphy's agenda has collapsed early on and that high profile legislative victories will be elusive.

He's never held elected office and his inexperience in dealing with competing political interests and fending off the unrelenting pressures from private interests has become apparent.

It is early, obviously, and Murphy may still find his footing before too long. In the interim, he may long for the campaigning days when whatever he suggested brought roars of approval, but accompanied by a thoroughly false sense of omnipotence.

Carl Golden is a senior contributing analyst with the William J. Hughes Center for Public Policy at Stockton University.