



Boonton bus issue shows where Gov. Chris Christie went off the road

By Paul Mulshine/The Star Ledger

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Alexandra Pais/New Jersey Local News Service

Gov. Chris Christie takes questions from the 4th grade classes at John Hill Elementary School during a visit in his support of recent salary freezes in the Boonton school district.

The elementary school in Boonton Township is celebrating its 50th anniversary this weekend. Somehow, I don't think a certain resident of nearby Mendham will be showing up.

Last November, **Chris Christie** piled up a margin of more than 2-to-1 in the township as he beat incumbent Gov. **Jon Corzine** in the race for governor. The voters no doubt expected that Christie would do something about their property taxes. I imagine the same is true for the rest of the residents of Morris County, who supported their favorite son by a similar margin.

Well, Christie's doing something all right. The self-proclaimed "conservative" Republican is cutting suburban property tax relief by amounts unimaginable even under the liberal Democrat he defeated.

Boonton Township was particularly hard hit. The school district had its aid cut by an astounding 81 percent.

Like most suburban towns, the township wasn't getting much aid to begin with, only about 6 percent of its \$11 million budget. Transportation aid was almost the only meaningful form of aid left after two Democratic governors had hacked away at the township's state support. And that aid totaled a mere \$329,000 in Corzine's last budget. The total under Christie's first budget? Zero.

"We have a very rural town," said school superintendent **Roseann Humphrey**. "There are no sidewalks and some roads have speed limits over 35 mph. We feel it would be unsafe for the kids to walk to school."

It would indeed, but that was never an issue before. When the township's Rockaway Valley School opened in 1960, the state had no sales tax. Yet the kids got bused to school.

Then the state added a sales tax. The kids got bused to school. It added an income tax, with every cent dedicated to property tax relief. The kids got bused to school.

But now they're supposed to walk? Something's wrong here, especially when you consider that the township's taxpayers send more than \$10 million in income tax to Trenton every year.

The taxpayers may be getting robbed, but the thief has an alibi: stimulus money. Christie has said the state had to cut aid to suburban schools this year because of a loss of federal stimulus dollars.

That sounds good until you realize that like most suburban towns, Boonton Township didn't see its state aid rise because of the stimulus money. So why is the aid dropping now?

Finding an answer to that question isn't easy. The state aid summary the Christie administration put out creates an apples-and-oranges comparison to prior years. It took me several days of staring at spreadsheets before I was able to sort it out.

Once I did, I realized that Christie will have in fiscal 2011 roughly the same amount of revenue for school aid as Corzine had in fiscal 2008: about \$7.4 billion. Corzine was certainly no friend of the suburbs, but when he sliced up that \$7.4 billion pie, he managed to send Boonton Township a \$696,000 portion. That's almost as much as they're getting this year.

Now Christie's slicing the same sized pie and Boonton's portion is almost invisible.

Meanwhile, 59 other suburban towns are getting not a crumb from Christie.

Humphrey said her district was willing to take a cut of 10 to 15 percent, which was what Education Commissioner Bret Schundler was hinting at in the days before the budget was released. But an 81 percent cut was unthinkable.

"In a small school district, we don't have much to play with, especially with special education costs," she said. "We've always maintained a very lean budget."

The school board was planning a budget with a 2.5 percent property tax hike. That's now risen to 5.5 percent in the budget that will go to the voters next week. And the voters will also be asked to approve a second question to restore bus service that could push property taxes up another 2 percent.

If that measure fails, parents may be offered the option of paying \$400 a year for bus service.

"I have a parent in the district with three children and he complains that would represent a \$1,200 tax hike for him," she said.

Indeed it would. And the same thing is happening all over the state. The state School Boards Association reports that more than a third of districts are planning busing cutbacks.

So just what is it that the great majority of suburbanites are getting in return for the billions of dollars in income and sales taxes they send to Trenton? Whatever it is, it's less than they got under the prior contender for the title of worst governor in state history.

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