



## Gov. Chris Christie to suburbs: Drop dead

By Paul Mulshine/The Star Ledger

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Ed Murray/The Star-Ledger

Governor Chris Christie.

If you are a harried homeowner in the suburbs struggling to pay your property taxes, I have some good news for you. You are finally going to hear Chris Christie's property tax plan.

I also have some bad news: It stinks. Many suburban towns would lose half of their state aid and some could lose all of it.

As for the cities — you know, those places full of people who voted for Jon Corzine? — they'll think their man won the election after all. The plan largely preserves urban aid at the expense of the suburbs.

If Christie had aired this plan last year during the Republican primary, his candidacy never would have made it past St. Paddy's Day. His two opponents promised plans that would have finally given suburban towns a share of state school aid equal to the cities. As for Christie, he said he would address the problem, but he never said how.

Today we'll find out how: He's going to make it worse. I hadn't thought that possible. Schools in suburban counties get so little aid that it just didn't seem they could be hurt much. And Christie had promised he was going to cut the state budget by so much that he would have the money to give even more aid to the suburbs.

Then he got elected. And all of a sudden he decided not to cut the state budget but to cut school aid instead, by close to a billion bucks. That's about 15 percent of state aid. Since cities get the most aid, they would face the biggest cuts if the reductions were done across the board.

But the education commissioner, Bret Schundler, comes from one of the cities that gets those outsized aid amounts, Jersey City. So Schundler came up with an ingenious formula. Instead of cutting aid as a percentage of total aid received by a district, he would cut it as a percentage of the total amount spent, said state Sen. Mike Doherty, a Warren County Republican who was briefed on the budget yesterday.

Total spending is a much bigger pie, so now the state needs a smaller slice, a mere 5 percent. That doesn't sound like much — until you realize that many suburban districts get only a bit more than 5 percent of their budgets in state aid.

A good example is the school district of the Chathams. That district produces excellent results with per-pupil spending that is below the state average. As for its state aid, it is a mere 6 percent of the budget, about \$3 million a year.

A 15 percent cut in aid would be a mere \$450,000. But under the Christie/Schundler plan, the district would lose \$2.5 million, or almost its entire state aid amount. Who will make up the difference? Homeowners will.

The Christie crowd is also pushing a state constitutional amendment that would cap property taxes at 2.5 percent annually. But that wouldn't take effect until the following year. In the meantime, state law allows the district to raise taxes by an amount equal to any state aid reduction, said Chatham schools superintendent Jim O'Neill.

O'Neill also noted that residents of the two Chathams pay an astounding \$54 million annually in income taxes, supposedly to provide property tax relief. Under the Christie plan, they'd get back less than a penny on the dollar.

"I think it's unfortunate that people in communities like Chatham that pay such a disproportionate cost to operate their local schools have the double hit of their income tax funding all the other schools," O'Neill said.

That's a polite way of putting it. I imagine most Morris residents will be a lot less reserved when they discover that the Mendham resident who runs the state has cut their school aid to little or nothing. As for the residents of Monmouth, Ocean, Somerset, Sussex and the other counties who gave Christie his victory margin, I suspect they'll be equally angry.

But the plan wasn't put together to please them. It was put together to please the court. Doherty told me that at yesterday's briefing of GOP legislative leaders, administration officials argued that this plan was more likely to win state Supreme Court approval than an across-the-board aid cut.

But Doherty pointed out that as long as we're going to amend the Constitution, it would be a simple matter to include on the November ballot a new school funding formula that would take the entire matter out of the court's hands.

Some day a governor may do exactly that. But as for this governor, now that we know his property tax plan, we also know why he kept it a secret for so long.

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