



Everything Jersey

## It was a tricky trip to the Magic Kingdom

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By Paul Mulshine/The Star Ledger

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Was it a Mickey Mouse move or was it just plain Goofy?

Sorry, I won't do that again. But that's the type of joke our governor's going to be hearing for the foreseeable future.

Last week, Chris Christie performed a feat that may rank as a first for any politician in an executive position in America: He boarded a plane and took off for Disney World just as a blizzard was arriving to shut down his state.

What was Dumbo thinking when he flew off to Fantasyland? Oops. Sorry.

Even in ideal weather, the trip would have been ill-advised. His lieutenant governor, Kim Guadagno, was also on vacation, in Mexico. Leaving the state meant handing over control to the most powerful Democrat in the state, Senate President Stephen Sweeney.

Sweeney publicly pronounced himself to have been shocked to get a call from Christie asking him to take over as acting governor for five days. He wasn't the only one who was shocked. The voters who created the \$141,000 position of lieutenant governor in 2005, and then filled it in 2009, also expected the occupant to serve in the event the governor left the state.

The Democrats seized on the sentiment.

"I think the governor has no respect for the office of lieutenant governor," said state Sen. Ray Lesniak, a Democrat from Elizabeth. "I voted for it, but I made a mistake. What's the purpose of having a lieutenant governor if the lieutenant governor's not around when the governor is unavailable?"

The real mistake was made by whoever failed to coordinate the vacations of Christie and Guadagno. The last-minute nature of the call to Sweeney indicates that when it comes to scheduling, someone in the administration was being either Sleepy or Dopey. But once it became clear the state was about to turn Snow White (sorry again), Christie should have had the common sense to cancel his trip.

Did the governor really need to see the fake snow at Disney World's Blizzard Beach when he could have seen the real thing at the Jersey Shore? That was where he piled up his biggest vote totals in 2009, and it was also the part of the state where some of the highest snow totals piled up. Yet the state highways in Monmouth and Ocean counties remained barely passable two days after the storm.

Adding to the chaos were the cutbacks imposed by Christie on counties and towns. This was the perfect opportunity for a take-charge executive to roll up his sleeves and show that government can provide essential services, even in an era of cost reduction.

One take-charge executive did exactly that. Newark Mayor Cory Booker turned every snowdrift into a photo op. He took advantage of his Twitter account to turn this blizzard into a national story starring the shovel-wielding public servant who's not afraid to work up a sweat.

Even worse for Christie were the reports later in the week that Guadagno was accompanied on her visit to Mexico by her cancer-stricken father. That detail cast her in a slightly better light than her boss. But a Mexican vacation is still a Mexican vacation, so she's hardly off the hook. We all have families. Most of us have jobs as well, and we have to make sure those jobs get done one way or the other.

As for Christie's national reputation, by Wednesday, newspapers from as far away as London were running articles like this:

"New Jersey Governor Chris Christie, who has been tipped as a potential Republican presidential candidate, flew out to Florida on Sunday — just before officials declared a state of emergency. He refuses to return until tomorrow."

Meanwhile, Guadagno has spent the past year hovering behind Christie, making herself look like she's ready to step in the moment he makes his move nationally. Had she cut her vacation short, she could have gotten the sort of publicity Booker got. He also made the headlines of that London Daily Mail article, which was "New Jersey governor under fire for going to Disney World during blizzard ... while the mayor of the state's biggest city digs citizens out himself."

So it was not a good week for our governor. Only one thing could make it worse.

Remember how former Massachusetts Gov. Michael Dukakis had his career ruined by a photo of himself wearing an Army helmet?

Well, if anyone's got a photo of Christie in Mickey Mouse ears, he might as well just stay in Mendham from now on.

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