

Is Christie Setting Himself Up to Run for President?

TRENTON, N.J./NEW YORK (Reuters)—New Jersey Governor Chris Christie on Tuesday made “renewal” of his state and country a central theme in his annual speech to state lawmakers that hinted at presidential aspirations.

Christie, under pressure to decide if he will seek the Republican nomination for president in 2016, discussed what he called a “bloated national government” and a need for bipartisanship during his state of the state speech.

However, he offered no new prescriptions for the state’s pension reform or jobs malaise, both of which could come back to haunt him if he runs as a presidential candidate.

“This administration believes today, and has always believed, that New Jersey and America will be a better place for middle class families when we shrink the size of government at every level,” he said. “We need a New Jersey renewal, and we need an American renewal.”

Christie talked about his travels around the country, mentioning Florida and several other states by name but not New Jersey’s own struggling gambling hub, Atlantic City, or the state’s nearly bankrupt transportation fund.

“The way that Christie delivered the speech was national in nature,” said Patrick Murray, director of the Monmouth University Polling Institute. “The main message for the 200 to 300 GOP party leaders was ‘I’m still that guy that you all remember. I’m stable, I’m bipartisan, and I’m still that guy that you thought I was before Bridgegate.’”

Over the past year, Christie was hounded by the so-called Bridgegate scandal, in which his former aides were accused of engineering a traffic jam as an alleged act of political retribution against a local mayor, and related ongoing federal

criminal probes.

More recently, he's been immersed in a controversy over whether he should have gone to Texas for a Jan. 4 Dallas Cowboys game at the expense of team owner Jerry Jones.

The Cowboys are part owner of a company that does business with the Port Authority of New York and New Jersey, the transportation agency which oversees the George Washington Bridge, where the traffic jam happened.

Christie's approval rating with New Jersey voters soared after Hurricane Sandy walloped the region in 2012. But it has dropped since, with more voters now disapproving of his leadership than approving of it, according to a Fairleigh Dickinson University PublicMind poll on Tuesday.

New Jersey has recovered only about half of the jobs it lost during the recession, compared to well over 100 percent nationally and nearly 200 percent for neighboring New York.

"Governor Christie has to reframe the narrative away from New Jersey because he doesn't have a New Jersey miracle that he can point to," said Matthew Hale, an associate professor of public administration at Seton Hall University in New Jersey.

To be sure, Christie did devote large portions of his address to a few state issues, including a proposal to strengthen drug addiction treatment services. He also touted significant improvements in Camden, a city perhaps best known for its high murder rate, which has been cut in half since 2012 with state help.

He also laid out New Jersey's economic growth and job gains, saying the state of the state "continues to get better," even though it is rated the second-worst state after Illinois by credit rating agencies.

He also said New Jersey's underfunded public pension system is an "insatiable beast" and called for reforms in addition to ones already enacted in 2011. Yet he provided no specific

proposals despite having first pushed for more reforms nearly a year ago.

Christie vowed to veto any income tax increase sent to him by lawmakers, as he has repeatedly done in the past. And he said Mercedes-Benz is moving its headquarters out of state because of the high cost of doing business there, adding that the legislature should lower taxes.

Democrats, who control New Jersey's legislature, said Christie failed to address other issues, like poverty, and recapped too much of the past rather than pointing to what he would do in the future.

"New Jersey is still in a lot of trouble," said Senate President Stephen Sweeney. "When you're at the bottom of the barrel in the region, that's not good enough."

Reporting by Daniel Kelley in Trenton and Hilary Russ in New York; Writing by Hilary Russ; Editing by Christian Plumb and Andrew Hay

© 2015 Thomson Reuters. All rights reserved.