

Carl Golden / Christie's strategy may be working

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With his ramped-up schedule of town-hall forums and public appearances, Gov. Chris Christie has apparently concluded the worst of the Bridgegate scandal is behind him.

Despite a steep decline in public support, Christie has begun a campaign-style effort to re-establish him as a strong, outspoken leader concentrating on addressing the state's most pressing problems. He's returned to the comfortable surroundings of town-hall sessions to berate legislative Democrats for failing to act on property-tax relief and additional reforms in the public pension system.

It is the old Christie, he who bulldozed his way through his first term, dominating the political environment, bending the Legislature to his will and attacking public-employee unions.

The recent town-hall meetings have been tame affairs - the hecklers and protesters at a few earlier ones have vanished - and Christie has been able to deliver his message to receptive and respectful audiences. Bridgegate, the scandal that has engulfed the administration for four months and remains the subject of two investigations, has been largely ignored by Christie and those attending his town-hall meetings.

Consequently, the governor has regenerated his meat-and-potatoes agenda, imploring listeners to

property taxes, restoring fiscal discipline to the state. The message is that the legislative committee's report is a waste of access lanes to the George Washington Bridge and addressing taxpayer concerns.

Legislative Republicans have become increasingly skeptical by the U. S. Attorney's Office has made the scandal a top priority. There appears to be restiveness among Democrats concerned about the expense and a perception that the governor is more interested in uncovering the truth than in addressing the scandal.

Senate President Steve Sweeney raised the issue of ending its work and allowing the U. S. attorney to investigate the scandal - former deputy chief of staff Brian Stepien - could not be compelled to respond to the investigation.

The reaction to Sweeney's comments was mixed. The court did uphold the assertion by Kelly and

incrimination, a decision seized upon as an argument in favor of the Sweeney's suggestion. Despite speculation his comments were designed to provide a degree of political cover for the governor, the court ruling may have sown some seeds of doubt among his fellow Democrats about allowing the investigation to proceed.

The growing expense, a sense that in the absence of new and damaging revelations the scandal may be losing momentum, and a fear that it will degenerate into partisan political mud-slinging have combined to bleed some of the support for the legislative committee.

Those troubled by these concerns have an acceptable alternative - cede the investigation to the U.S. Attorney's Office and a federal grand jury, which are better equipped and more resourceful in uncovering the truth of the scandal.

Christie, in the meantime, can continue to refer to the administration-funded review that exonerated him and his top staff from any involvement in the scandal, even though nearly three in four New Jerseyans believe the report's conclusions were arrived at before the review began.

Christie's strategy - change the subject and move the debate onto more favorable ground - has shown signs of success. His town halls continue to draw standing-room-only crowds, the media still show up, and he successfully plays both audience and reporters in a way seldom seen in New Jersey politics.

The storm is by no means over. The U. S. attorney is a formidable force not to be dismissed lightly. The governor, though, has apparently glimpsed a sliver of sunlight and intends to make the most of it.

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