

## **GUEST OPINION: Gov. Christie's 'Trickle-Down' Budget**

By Sen. Shirley K. Turner (D-Mercer)  
*Centraljersey.com*  
May 20, 2010

I can't help but imagine that the ghost of Ronald Reagan is standing on the sidelines somewhere cheering on Gov. Christie as he attempts to resuscitate "trickle down economics." Some 30 years later, we're watching the ramifications of this failed experiment play out on the national stage. Do we really want to replicate this disaster at the state level?

Gov. Christie's proposed budget is like a vice intent on squeezing out the lower and middle income classes in New Jersey.

We witnessed this firsthand when one of my constituents, a senior surviving on only \$725 a month in Social Security, recently showed up at my office in tears because his property tax bill skyrocketed from \$400 to \$666, forcing him to forego paying his car insurance bill after turning over nearly his entire check to the city of Trenton. With an income of only \$8,700 per year, this gentleman cannot live on much less. Factoring in the rising cost of gas and groceries, this property tax increase is literally taxing him out of his home.

Seniors on fixed incomes, many of whom have owned their homes for decades, are being squeezed at every end. This year they are not receiving a cost of living increase in their Social Security payments. And under the governor's proposed budget, they will lose their property tax rebates, assume a \$310 annual deductible if they have prescription drug coverage under the state's Senior Gold or PAAD programs, and see their co-pays on name brand prescriptions double under the PAAD program.

Now factor in some of the largest property tax increases in history, and many seniors will be forced to choose between putting food on the table or selling their homes, many of which have long been paid off, but the property taxes are now unaffordable. And in this economy, most won't even be able to sell their home.

I use Trenton as an example because the situation will only be made worse by the governor's proposal to cut \$43 million in special aid funding that is heavily relied on to offset the city's loss of 50 percent of its property tax revenue to state properties. But, this isn't a new phenomenon and it's not just limited to Trenton. It's a statewide problem that has only been compounded this year by the drastic cuts in state aid.

The governor all but assured local property taxes would skyrocket everywhere when he announced his plans to cut roughly \$1 billion in direct school aid, \$445 million in municipal aid, and \$848 million in property tax rebates, on top of the \$475 million he confiscated from the surpluses of school districts in the current budget.

The April 20 rejection of a record number of school budgets provided an outlet for voters

to vent their outrage over out-of-control property taxes. At present, more than 50 percent of property taxes collected go to fund school operations. Our over-reliance on this method of funding is cripplingly unfair. Now that the voters have spoken, it's time to get to work, both on short-term solutions to this year's budget problems and long-term systemic changes to the way we pay for education and government services at the local level.

With over 500 municipalities and nearly 600 school districts, it's time we get serious about promoting consolidation and shared services in order to save taxpayer dollars. Ultimately, we need to be creative in finding solutions to make education and government services as cost-effective as possible.

In the long-term, we need to find a new method to fund education, one that is not so reliant on property taxes, which do not take into account a person's real ability to pay, particularly in the case of seniors and the disabled.

Unless we find a more equitable way to fund our education system, it will collapse under its own weight. Ultimately our children are the ones who will pay the price. Already they are watching their teachers get laid off; class room sizes expand; special ed, basic skills, athletic and arts programs eliminated; and their overall educational experience diminish.

The governor's latest solution to our education crisis is to back a voucher system — a move that will not only divert more money from public education and put it into private, religious and charter schools, but one that will also blur the lines between separation of church and state if we now start funding religious-based schools.

The governor's toolkit to fix New Jersey is starting to look more like a wrecking ball. And if you're a senior, a student or of modest income, you better get out of the way. But if you're earning over \$1 million per year, you are very fortunate because the governor has no intention to ask you to "share the pain."

*Sen. Shirley K. Turner, a Democrat, represents New Jersey's 15th Legislative District, which includes Princeton Township and Borough, Hopewell Township and Borough, Lawrence, Pennington and Trenton.*