

African-American Rights Groups Blast Gov. Chris Christie's Decision to Replace Justice Wallace

By Matt Friedman
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TRENTON — A coalition of African-American leaders blasted Gov. Chris Christie's decision not to re-nominate state Supreme Court Justice John Wallace today at the Statehouse.

"There are some people who are in disbelief, some people who are disappointed, and there are some people who are just straight up disgusted," said Jerome Harris, president of the New Jersey Black Issues Convention.

Wallace, 68, the only African-American justice on the court, ends his seven-year term on May 20. If approved for tenure, he would have been able to keep the seat for an additional 22 months, when he will reach the mandatory retirement age of 70. He is the first Supreme Court justice not to be re-appointed to the bench since New Jersey revamped the justice system in the 1940s.

Harris was joined by representatives from several other organizations: The Trenton and Gloucester County branches of the NAACP; the Garden State Bar Association; the Black Ministers Council; the South Jersey Black Political Caucus and the Our Children/Our Schools Coalition.

Although Harris downplayed the significance of Wallace's race, saying he was more concerned that Christie's move would politicize the court, other leaders were more blunt.

"To the NAACP, this is a slap in the face," said Phillip Warner, southern regional coordinator for the New Jersey NAACP. "This was an unprecedented move by the governor. And the first time he chooses not to re-nominate a sitting justice, it has to be an African-American. You cannot remove race from this equation."

Harris said it's "appropriate" that Senate President Stephen Sweeney (D-Gloucester) has refused to authorize hearings for Gov. Chris Christie's nominee to succeed Wallace, Anne Murray Patterson.

The coalition has requested meetings with Democratic and Republican legislative leaders, and plans to hold community forums on policy issues in churches across the state.

"This is a wake-up call for folks across classes, races and geography that this governor intends to reform New Jersey, and we have to be actively engaged in that reformation," said Harris.