

A politically motivated veto?

BY **BENJAMIN DINOVELLI** • COLUMNIST • SEPTEMBER 15, 2014

Annually, an estimated 50,000 people die due to exposure to secondhand smoke, according to the American Lung Association.

Last week, Gov. Chris Christie had the opportunity to help reduce that number. New Jersey legislative bill S1772, recently placed on his desk, aimed to ban smoking in public parks and at beaches. Ranked 11th in population size nationally, New Jersey is both a home and a tourist destination for millions of Americans. Signing the bill would not only have demonstrated his dedication to public health but also made New Jersey safer for many.

Instead, Christie vetoed the bill. Despite overwhelming bipartisan support in both the state assembly and senate, Christie framed his veto on the basis of local rights, disagreeing with the idea that “the state should substitute its judgment for that of our local elected officials or upset the careful balancing of interests that informs the decision-making process at the local level.”

Granted, New Jerseyans have a right to smoke. However, a closer look at the proposed law reveals that it would have intentionally included elements of local autonomy. S1772 included a compromise provision that would have allowed local officials to designate up to 20 percent of public parks and beaches as smoking-permitted zones. Despite this, he complained that the bill was a “one-size-fits-all” prescription.

In his Conservative Political Action Conference speech earlier in the year, Christie proclaimed, “It’s time for [the Republican Party] to get pragmatic,” arguing that Republicans should place productive pragmatic solutions before ideology. However, in the face of the

health benefits, it is hard not to see this move as political maneuvering, rather than upholding small government ideals.

His main issue was one of central government imposing its will on local constituencies. Christie highlights how local officials have “thoughtfully considered” such bans before and how they must balance “public health, safety, economics, individual liberties and other relevant factors” in their decision-making.

While economics definitely should not be flat-out ignored — nor am I accusing local officials of not considering issues thoughtfully — it seems that the state is much better positioned to address issues of public health involving smoking. The problem is that smoking is rarely an issue of immediacy. Lung damage often does not have consequences until months or years into the future, and the probability of indirect health risks often may seem much less of a concern than producing a strong town budget or increasing tourism.

In 2013 alone, New Jersey attracted 87.2 million tourists to the state; tourism is undoubtedly a huge way to vitalize a local economy. However, many of the tourists who visit the state include families with children, who are often the most vulnerable to the toxic fumes created through smoking because children are in the middle of their physical development. Unfortunately, this might not always be addressed as pressingly on a local level. The state, however, is large enough to run a department of health. Local municipalities are already too pressed on resources to dedicate the same attention.

Additionally, on a pragmatic level, this bill would not only have protected the health of New Jerseyans but also would have had economic benefits for the state as well. In 2006, the CDC found that \$5.6 billion a year was lost in productivity because of the health effects of secondhand smoke. In a time of fragile economic growth nationally, it would seem that Christie, a results-minded governor, would want to do everything in his power to cut waste and increase economic output. Instead of nipping the problem in the bud, this just allows the problem to grow, kicking the can down the road. Often, medical issues addressed much later in life not only require much more treatment but also much higher health expenditures as well.

In light of all of these practical benefits and the bipartisan support that the bill had experienced prior to reaching Christie's desk, it seems puzzling that Christie, who touted his bipartisan nature in his second race for the governorship, would veto such a bill. Although the bill was acceptable among most New Jersey Republicans, such a stance seems to go against the national Republican mindset, largely influenced by the small government Tea Party coalition, which has become prominent in the last five years. Additionally, promoting small government values would be helpful to any Republican candidate in 2016, especially one who might have an issue with being framed as too moderate.

Historically, other bills passed with large majorities in both houses and vetoed by Christie — such as a restriction on magazine capacities, a bill to subsidize family clinics and a ban on the locking of pregnant female pigs into cages — have not become law. While it is impossible to know the inner-workings of Christie's mind, it seems to be valid to ask whether Christie is doing this out of true belief or for personal gain. It would be truly sad if Christie decided to put his own political health before the health of the people he represents.

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