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Stile: Christie's smoking-ban veto is noticed beyond N.J.

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BY CHARLES STILE, RECORD COLUMNIST
THE RECORD

It was hailed as a straightforward step to protect the public from the dangers of secondhand smoke at crowded beaches and public parks.

But now, with the stroke of his pen, Governor Christie has vetoed a bill that would have further limited smoking in public. It's the latest in a series of legislative rejections that may have more to do with protecting him from attacks in a crowded field of rivals for the Republican presidential nomination in 2016.

With his veto, Christie publicly opposed a bill that enjoyed widespread, bipartisan support and seemed perfectly in sync with centrist New Jersey voters, who have adapted to similar smoking bans. But Christie no longer has to face those voters in a statewide election.

Republican voters in Iowa or New Hampshire or in Southern states dependent on Big Tobacco are looking to be the next test for Christie. They will be the ones who will either grant him the GOP nomination or cast him aside if he does run for president.

Christie may very well argue that his veto was prompted by the greater public interest, not his own political ambitions. But with speculation about a possible presidential bid building, every move Christie takes is scrutinized in that light and analyzed as if it is calculated positioning for a future campaign.

The smoking-ban veto, penned in the State House, gives Christie benefits beyond Jersey's borders. It allows Christie to cast himself as a small-government conservative, one who refrains from exercising unilateral, centralized power — a move that appeals to more libertarian-leaning conservatives who hotly oppose the expansion of federal government.

He also gets to depict himself as a bold conservative leader who used his veto to halt liberal, Democratic excess.

And he avoids angering the tobacco industry.

Despite its waning political clout in Washington, Big Tobacco remains a potent supply of campaign cash for the national GOP. Tobacco companies contributed nearly \$2.5 million to federal candidates over the past two years, with 80 percent of it flowing to Republican candidates, according to the Center of Responsive Politics.

“They are not the almighty, uber power lobby, but they remain a powerful interest group,” said Ferrell Guillory, an expert on the politics of the tobacco industry at the University of North Carolina. “Obviously, they have an interest in keeping restrictions and regulations on smoking to a minimum.”

Altria, the tobacco conglomerate that includes Philip Morris, the nation’s largest cigarette maker, lobbied against the New Jersey legislation, state records show.

Christie is also aware of Big Tobacco’s cash.

The Republican Governors Association raised \$130,000 from tobacco companies during Christie’s stint as the group’s chairman, according to the most recent filings in June.

The veto allows Christie to keep the peace with tobacco companies — and may very well prevent them from investing heavily in a presidential campaign for U.S. Sen. Rand Paul of Kentucky, whose operatives could use the cash to finance attack ads against Christie in a tight primary contest.

It’s not the first time Christie has used his veto pen to strike down apparently popular New Jersey legislation that might cause problems for him as a presidential candidate in more-conservative states.

In July, Christie gutted legislation that would have reduced guns’ maximum ammunition capacity from 15 rounds to 10. The move earned him plaudits from gun enthusiasts and the National Rifle Association, an influential force among conservatives.

He vetoed legislation that would have restored funding to family planning clinics — a move that could help Christie with abortion foes, who are wary of Christie’s antiabortion stance he took early in his political career.

And in November, Christie vetoed a bill backed by animal-rights activists that would have prevented female pigs from being locked in metal cages during pregnancy. That veto appeased the powerful pork industry lobby in states like Iowa and North Carolina.

Even though most of these measures passed the Legislature with veto-proof majorities, Christie has successfully fended off every attempt to override his veto. He has also used the veto message to make a political statement aimed at a larger

national audience.

In Wednesday's veto, Christie expressed concerns imposing a "one-size-fits-all" ban that could weaken the power of local governments to decide what's best for their communities.

Christie never expressed such concerns when he imposed a cap on school superintendents' salaries, a one-size-fits-all plan that limited local school districts' ability to keep or attract experienced administrators.

And the smoking ban already included a provision to allow for local flexibility: The bill was amended to give Shore towns the ability to set aside portions of public beaches for smokers.

Signing the bill might have raised suspicions that Christie was just another Northeast liberal, more of an acolyte of former New York Mayor Michael Bloomberg, a Republican-turned-independent who championed socially liberal causes, like a public smoking ban. Now Christie at least keeps the door open to libertarians and conservatives who have rallied around Paul.

"He can cite an example like this [veto] and say, 'The popular thing to do would have been to sign this bill. I don't want people smoking ... but I saw this as another big government intrusion on individual rights,'" said Larry Sabato, a political analyst from the University of Virginia. "Now, there's a talking point."

Assemblywoman Valerie Vainieri-Huttle, D-Englewood, one of the bill's sponsors, also had a few things to say.

"By vetoing this measure, the governor is essentially ignoring empirical evidence and standing in the way of a healthier New Jersey," she said.

Christie remains standing at the center of the New Jersey universe. But, as the veto demonstrates, he may have already moved on.

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