

# Opinion: Sweeney, Coughlin Are Still on the Same Page Even if Temporarily on Different Paragraphs

CARL GOLDEN | JUNE 8, 2020 | **OPINION**

Differing approaches to the Murphy administration's massive borrowing plan don't in any way signal a parting of the ways for the Legislature's presiding officers



Carl Golden

To all those tea leaf readers who inhabit New Jersey's political/media world, the difference of opinion between the Legislature's presiding officers over the Murphy administration's borrowing plan is neither serious nor long-lasting and is certainly not indicative of an early fracturing of the unity which has prevailed since 2017.

While Assembly Speaker Craig Coughlin (D-Middlesex) was an early proponent of bonding for some \$5 billion to bridge the budget gap caused by the COVID-19 pandemic, Senate President Steve Sweeney (D-Gloucester) initially opposed it, softened his stance to expressing misgivings and recently acknowledged that some level of borrowing would be necessary to overcome an unprecedented fiscal challenge.

The Assembly approved the proposal on a party-line vote last week. It is notable that all South Jersey Democrats supported the bill, a demonstration of solidarity that would not have occurred if the southern leaders — including Sweeney — weren't on board.

Sweeney sought greater clarity on the governor's proposal, including a repayment schedule and how the funds — if approved — would be allocated.

He avoided the hard-line opposition which has been a hallmark of his previous positions, particularly on tax and fiscal issues and, while stopping short of full-throated support, understood the state confronts a situation unlike any in its history.

To be clear, Sweeney and Coughlin are on the same page, albeit they may temporarily be on different paragraphs.

## **Why Sweeney was initially reticent**

The Senate president's initial reticence is traceable to his insistence that on matters of major consequence, the Legislature's role in shaping a response must be equal to that of the executive.

There is little doubt that the Speaker shares that outlook. The rejection in two consecutive budget years of the governor's recommendation to increase the income tax on individuals earning over \$1 million a year is, perhaps, the clearest manifestation of the Sweeney-Coughlin alliance.

Under the leadership of both, the Legislature has wrested greater control of the budget process from the executive and has increased its voice significantly in dealing with the governor's agenda.

It's been a partnership that has served both men well, indeed, and even though it appears at times that Sweeney is the senior partner, the Speaker's influence is equal.

Coughlin is the more soft-spoken of the two and often appears more conciliatory in seeking compromise and common ground.

Sweeney is outspoken and blunt, willing — if not eager — to engage in the steel cage match that the state's politics often resembles and to use some colorful language to make his point.

He is the quintessential well-balanced Irish politician — he has a chip on both shoulders.

Coughlin has shown flashes of anger on occasion, notably when he was targeted in a television commercial aired by confidants of the governor to pressure the Legislature into accepting budget recommendations.

He was also publicly critical of the governor last year when, a few weeks before the election, Murphy questioned the Legislature's motives in failing to approve the issuance of driver's licenses to undocumented immigrants.

## **Value of their united front**

The united front that Sweeney and Coughlin have constructed has served them and their respective caucuses well and neither is about to allow it to be undermined by

what appear to be easily overcome differences of opinion on the bonding/borrowing plan.

While Sweeney's early reluctance was genuine, he understood the ramifications of inaction could be devastating.

When Murphy warned that a shortfall of as much as \$10 billion in the current and forthcoming fiscal years would force massive public employee layoffs and heretofore unimaginable cuts, Sweeney heard the message.

Inaction would also touch the third rail of New Jersey politics — property-tax increases in a state in which the average of nearly \$9,000 per year has been and will continue to lead the nation.

Sweeney, despite his occasional bull-in-the-china-shop style, is both insightful and deft in the political insider game.

He recognizes that spending cuts alone will not suffice and he's not about to lead a Democratic Party campaign in the politically charged 2021 election year saddled with a record of property-tax increases, massive cuts in aid to municipalities and school districts, and the layoff of thousands of state and local government workers.

Whatever differences may exist between Sweeney and Coughlin over the bonding proposal will be resolved quickly and quietly and any perceived threat to the unity which has served them so well will disappear.

## **Look for minor tweaks**

Sweeney may hold out for some minor tweaks and readjustments in the legislation, but he will steer it through the Senate and he and the Speaker will tout it as a sealed agreement which averted a fiscal disaster.

He may also use whatever leverage he holds to attempt to reach a commitment from the administration to consider his recommended changes in the state's public employee pension and health benefits system.

Several Republicans have threatened litigation over the borrowing measure on constitutional grounds and it is unlikely any GOP senator will support it. They argue that the proposal provides for bond repayment to be derived from state sales-tax

revenue, but if it falls short, to come from a surcharge on property taxes. Similar language, though, appears almost as boilerplate in previous bond issues.

At the end of the day, the state will hold the borrowing authority and the Sweeney-Coughlin unity front will stand as strong as it ever did, and the tea leaf readers will move on.

**Carl Golden**

Carl Golden is a senior contributing analyst with the William J. Hughes Center for Public Policy at Stockton University.

