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Legislative Report
October 10, 2017

Overview

The New Jersey Legislature is currently on their traditional pre-election recess and little legislative activity has taken place in Trenton since the summer. The Senate and Assembly will not return for routine legislative business until after the election. While no schedule has been released, it should be expected that December and early January will feature a number of meeting dates as the Governor and Legislature looks to close out their terms in office. This “lame duck” period is often unpredictable, especially when a Governor is leaving office. However, it is unlikely that this activity will touch on boating before the new session begins in January 2018.

Governor’s Race

The campaign for Governor has captured the attention of most voters this election season. Democrat Phil Murphy has maintained a consistent lead over Republican Lieutenant Governor Kim Guadagno since they became candidates. But as the race moves closer to November the distance between the candidates will certainly tighten. Voters are having a hard time separating Guadagno from Governor Christie’s historic unpopularity but they are also unsure of Murphy who has little record on which to judge him. The race will ultimately be decided by unaffiliated voters and conservative Democrats who previously supported Chris Christie in 2009 and 2013.

Legislative Races

All 120 seats in the State Senate and General Assembly are up for grabs. Even before the election is over we know there will be several new faces in Trenton in 2018. Retirements, death and candidates running for other offices will result in no less than 16 new Senators and Assembly members next session. When all is said and done the Legislature could feature 20% new faces or people in new roles.

The hottest races can be found in South, Central and Northern New Jersey, including:

District 2

Democratic Senator Jim Whelan had already planned to retire at the end of this term before his untimely death last month changed the dynamics in the District. The suddenly open Senate seat was filled by Democrat Colin Bell. But the favorite to take the seat for many analysts is Republican Assemblyman Chris Brown. The race appears to be a statistical tie as the election nears which reflects the competitive nature of this District over the past decade.

The Assembly race features incumbent Democrat Vince Mazzeo and his running mate John Armato. They are challenged by Republicans Vince Sera and Brenda Taube. The GOP is hopeful that Chris Brown's popularity will lead him to the Senate and that he will have coattails to bring along his running mates. The Democrats believe intense PAC support, TV ads and Murphy's popularity will keep the Senate seat in their hands and that it will be enough to take back Brown's Republican Assembly seat.

District 11

The Monmouth County 11th District has, despite its changes in redistricting, leaned Republican for much of the past 25 years. That changed in 2015 when Democrats Joann Downey and Eric Houghtaling defeated two GOP incumbent Assemblywomen by a slim margin. Democrats have since that day begun to try and fortify the Assembly seats. The incumbents are being challenged by Republican local elected officials Rob Acerra and Michael Whelan.

But the signature defining race in that District will be for State Senate. Republican Jennifer Beck has represented most of the District in the Assembly and Senate since 2006 where she had developed an intelligent and independent style. She is being challenged by local business leader Vin Gopal who Democrats believe has a similar style that reflects the suburban, professional makeup of the District.

The race could be the closest in the State on Election Day and very well could be the most costly when it is all added up. The Murphy/Guadagno matchup will also play a large part in the results in this race as turnout will certainly be higher than in 2015 especially since both candidates live in the County. Great GOP turnout in places like Colts Neck, Freehold and Ocean (where candidate Acerra is Deputy Mayor) will give them an edge while Democrats will be pushing to maximize their vote totals in more reliable towns like Asbury Park, Long Branch and Neptune.

District 16

The Somerset-Middlesex-Hunterdon District could be among the most strangely designed out of all 40 in the Legislature. With a mixture of heavily conservative and heavily liberal communities packed next to typical New Jersey suburbia, it produced an election in 2015 that by a slim margin left residents there with a Republican Senator and both a Democrat and Republican Assemblyman.

Republican State Senator and longtime incumbent Kip Bateman is expected to retain his seat against Democrat Laurie Poppe. The major focus in this District for Democrats and Republicans will be the fight for the 2 Assembly seats.

Democrats are running incumbent Andrew Zwicker and challenger Roy Freiman against Republicans former Assemblywoman Donna Simon and Somerset County Freeholder Mark Caliguire. In 2015 Zwicker defeated Simon by just 78 votes and Republicans have longed for a chance at a do over in this race.

While those are just 3 highlighted races, the voters will ultimately decide which Districts will be competitive on Election Day. For sure, Democratic and Republican campaign professionals see far more opportunities on the ground and both sides remain optimistic in a number of below the radar areas. For example, the Democrats continue to build a message that the reliably Republican 39th District in Bergen County is competitive and ripe for an upset. Republicans believe NJEA efforts to unseat Senate President Sweeney in District 3 could have long range impact not only if they succeed but especially if it keeps Sweeney pinned down at home instead of raising money for other candidates across the State as a person in his position would be doing this time of year.

Post-Election

When the Election is over and a new Governor is chosen, MTA/NJ will immediately set out to help the incoming Administration define policies that impact the boating industry. This process has begun already and will intensify as the new Governor selects a Transition Team to formulate their agenda and select the Staff that will run the incoming State government.