

INSIDERNJ'S

FY2024 BUDGET



SPECIAL EDITION

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**GENOVA
BURNS**

THE 2024 BUDGET

A BRIEF HISTORY OF US

BY MAX PIZARRO

When we read about the fall of the Roman Empire, we perhaps find it comforting to consider barbarians from the hinterlands overrunning civilization as the *primary* reason for the collapse of our systemic forbearers. At our weakest, we refuse to even consider political corruption from *within* as a significant contributing cause for the mighty Romans' demise.

Why?

It cuts too close.

It feels too much like a case of repetitive history, another cave-in to our reptilian appetites, as our contemporary institutions practically crumble to the touch.

Which brings us to the 2024 Budget of the State of New Jer-

sey (or Nova Caesarea for those careful readers insistent on making the Roman connection).



A few weeks have passed since Governor Phil Murphy signed the \$54.3 Billion Appropriation into law on the heels of a legislative session that contained all the drama of Cicero not only silent but gagged.

The woman in a bar tells a fellow, “You must be a Shakespearean actor.”

“Yes,” says the man. “I’ve played Hamlet my whole life, but never onstage.”

So too did the great festooned partridge of New Jersey politics, arraigned in the State Capitol for a great production if not exactly on the order of a tragedy of ideas, well, then pageantry of some extraordinary entertainment value. Instead, as the state anticipated Independence Day and a celebration underscoring all the gravity and grandeur of free speech, the Great Gold Dome emitted a muffled whimper of submission.

It was strange, unsettling, even now, after two decades of con-

temporary Trenton corrosion. For if no awesome debate shaped the stage of public destiny, the sensation proved even worse, like watching a cloak drop over everything and drench the world in darkness. This was Nova Caesarea fulfilling a public tradition of Roman republicanism? No, actually, it was more like the entombment of democracy.

Operating with a sense of deadline-shadowed urgency on the last day of the season, Democrats passed the \$54.3 billion 2024 State Budget, running over the most enfeebled protests of minority Republicans, who bemoaned a lack of transparency, ballooned spending, and a bulging rainy day fund, all cast in the name of “the good.”

The vote was 51-27 in the Assembly.

“A budget that reflects the diverse needs and priorities of our state,” explained Assemblywoman Eliana Pintor Marin (D-29), chair of the Budget Committee, in reference to the document, noting in particular her pride over priorities, including tax relief for NJ residents contained in the ANCHOR Boost, and the child tax credit. “Taken as a whole, this reflects

our commitment to a fairer and more prosperous state.”

Retiring Assemblyman Hal Wirths (R-24) – the ranking Republican member of the Budget Committee (pictured, top) – panned the budget. “Twenty billion bigger than when the last governor left office,” said an aghast Wirths, who also cited numerous OLS changes. “I think that we’re voting on a different budget than was approved by the budget committee.”

When I was first elected the budget was \$34 billion.

There are no fiscal controls, just an addiction to more and more spending.

That one figure stood out massively.

A budget \$20 billion dollars more than when the last governor occupied the post.

Republican gubernatorial nominee Jack Ciattarelli had harped on the subject of runaway spending when he faced Governor Phil Murphy in their 2021 debate. The Democratic Party incumbent blamed Ciattarelli for being a Republican elected official in state government during the years of Governor Chris Christie.

“You were there,” Murphy taunted.

Then Ciattarelli got tough with him.

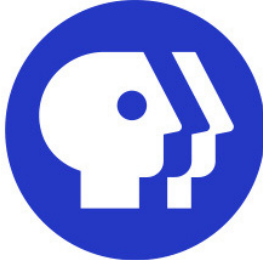
“The budget is up \$11 billion,” said the challenger. “If he had cut property taxes in half, I wouldn’t have run for governor, I would have endorsed him.”

So, if it was \$11 billion two years ago, uh - it had since morphed to \$20 billion.

“I urge my colleagues to vote no on this budget. The spending is unsustainable,” advised Wirths. “There’s no reason to spend this kind of money. There could be more of this returned to the taxpayers. I’d like to see the money go out now for immediate tax relief.”

Assemblyman Chris DePhillips (R-40) likewise expressed dis-



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may. “Fifty-four billion dollars? Really? When I was first elected the budget was \$34 billion. There are no fiscal controls, just an addiction to more and more spending.”

“A fiscal time bomb,” said Assemblyman Gary Scharfenberger (R-13), who cited cuts to school district spending in the state

budget, which will boomerang in local taxes.

But these came across more as napkin lines jotted down for the express purpose of satisfying that stunned constituent back in suburbia who wants to know that his conservative Republican representative can also express outrage over liberal excess.

It didn’t feel like anything other than inevitable acquiescence to the reality of unhinged spending, rationalized by federal COVID money that put the entire budget in bulked-up massive muscle mode, and left its critics resigned to watching a roid-ripped body turn into a 95 pound weakling in a few years when that federal money dries up in an economic downturn.





INVESTMENTS FOR FOLKS



Democrats pushed back, Assemblyman Benjie Wimberly (D-35) among them.

The word of choice to justify the budget?

Investments.

New Jersey was finally, by God, making *investments*.

That these investments came mostly under cover of darkness without a chance to peruse the fine points left the rest of us to trust that these lifelong establishment politicians had our best interests at heart.

We are a good and decent people, after all. Or rather, we are good and decent folks, and like the good and decent folks we are, we

elect good and decent folks to make investments with our money.

Of course, this proved a budget season wherein a lot of folks talked about folks.

They didn't talk about actual dollar amounts.

They didn't even actually provide a budget with line items in black and white.

But they talked about *folks*, who

presumably needed a budget that crammed \$20 billion in *investments* into our bright New Jersey future. Oh, and don't forget, our beloved seniors, those decent and hard-working folks killing themselves to try to afford the property taxes here, would get a senior tax freeze under the benevolent designs of a new plan unveiled by Speaker Craig Coughlin (D-19), the kindly Irish American overseer of the people's house.

What do you do when you're inflating a budget by \$20 billion?

You throw in a furrowed brow, deeply concerned and gravely situationally aware acknowledgment of the plight of a vulnerable voting age population of folks.

Here's how Coughlin put it in a press release:



“In an effort to address the rising costs facing senior citizens across New Jersey, [the Speaker] unveiled a proposal to cut property taxes in half for most seniors and significantly expand assistance for medical benefits. This week, Speaker Coughlin introduced legislation (A1) that would create a new property tax credit program called StayNJ, which will make it more affordable for residents to stay in their homes. Additional legislation was introduced that will significantly expand medical assistance for health insurance and prescription drugs.

“Under StayNJ, the state would provide a 50% credit on seniors’ property tax bills, capped at \$10,000. Homeowners who are

65 years or older would be eligible for the tax credit on their principal residence, and there is no income limit for eligibility. Payments would be applied directly to tax bills, with benefits starting on January 1, 2025.

“I’ve heard from people who have to sell the home they raised their children in, and leave the neighborhood they’ve lived in for thirty years, because they can’t afford to stay,” Speaker Coughlin. “My plan, StayNJ, will mean that seniors have the freedom to plan a future in New Jersey with friends and loved ones they’ve spent a lifetime making memories with.”

Sounds great, right?

Sure.

But this is New Jersey, so there has to be a catch, correct?

No, no catch.

Wait, you mean the legislature actually passed a bill that would give real, tangible and sustained property tax relief to seniors?

Yes, well, er, um, yeah, kind of, it’s just that...

What?

Well, it doesn’t kick in for another three years.

2026.

Ah. There was the rub, to paraphrase Shakespeare. “For in that sleep of death what dreams may come when we have shuffled off this mortal coil...”

Yes, Bill.

We may all be dead by then.

Certainly, many of us in the vicinity of senior citizenship will be teetering at the brink.

But Democrats need this election cycle. They need a win in the 11th Legislative District, where incumbent state Senator Vin Gopal has a significant challenge in front of him.

Republican Steve Dnistrian is not a howling Trump acolyte wrapped in a Confederate Flag and wearing a minotaur head-dress. If Democrats in the majority designed the StayNJ initiative to distract the public from the \$20 billion budget air pump, Dnisytrain at least proved some ability to sniff out a rat.

Senator Vin Gopal is back to spinning his record, argued the Republican challenger, specifi-



CWA

cally on the StayNJ senior tax relief program, slotted to theoretically take effect in 2026. The argument here is about when the tax cut should go to voters: Republicans want it to start immediately. Gopal wants it to start in 2026 – giving Trenton Democrats enough time to go back on their word.

Take it from the *Star Ledger*:

“Republicans attempted multiple times in recent days to amend the plan to have the full benefits take effect in this fiscal year. But they were shot down by Democrats each time.”

“That’s right: Vin Gopal could have cut your taxes immediately,” Dnistrian argued. “Republicans put that amendment on the floor, and Gopal voted against it. But he chose to punt the tax cut to the year 2026 – and he made it subject to provisions that mean seniors will probably never see his phantom tax cut.

“The Gopal campaign attacks aren’t surprising, given how our neighbors welcomed Governor Murphy to Red Bank last week,” said Steve Dnistrian. “Gopal needs to spin his record because he knows he failed Monmouth families. The truth is, Gopal

could have made this tax cut effective immediately. Instead, he fell in line – and seniors are likely to never see the full tax cut they were promised.”

Gopal stood sturdily on his record.

From a story by *InsiderNJ* reporter John Van Vliet:

“This time, Gopal has his name on a piece of legislation that just passed through the Senate Budget Committee 12-0, with Republican support, not just Democrats. This is for the StayNJ senior citizen tax relief program that would provide a hike in property tax relief for both homeowners and renters within the construct of the ANCHOR program. Seniors who are 65 or older can see the state bringing them a 50% property tax

credit, up to \$6,500. This applies to those seniors who make less than a half-million dollars a year. The benefit would go into effect on New Years Day, 2026, with three fiscal years building up hundreds of millions of dollars to provide for the credit. Further, the “Senior Freeze” relief program has been expanded so that those seniors who make up to \$150,000 are eligible and the residency requirement has been shrunk from a decade to just three years.”

Most insiders (in both parties) confessed that the Ledger had it right.

Democrats in NJ will pray for a meteor to destroy the planet and witness it (very briefly!) sooner than actually believe the StayNJ legislation actually has legs and, in fact, will come to pass.





GOVERNMENT AND PUBLIC AFFAIRS

THE DRAMA (SUCH AS IT WAS)

In the throes of the budget session, Assemblyman Brian Bergen (R-26) – an Army veteran who flew Apache Attack Helicopters – offered the most strenuous resistance to the StayNJ bill.

First, he tried to secure tax relief for disabled veterans.

Assembly Majority Leader Lou Greenwald (D-6) blocked him by getting the motion tabled.

Then Bergen bucked Coughlin's bill, arguing that it will likely not come to fruition, as it promises tax relief for seniors three years from now, and much can change

between now and then. The Morris County Republican also objected to giving high income earners a tax break just because they qualify as seniors.



Coughlin pushed back, arguing that Bergen missed the point, and offering the bill – in part – as a way of showing gratitude to New Jersey's senior population.

But Bergen – who called the bill one of the toughest of his career as a lawmaker – said the legislation offers little more than an opportunity for politicians to look good.

His efforts proved unsuccessful, as the bulk of GOP invective targeted the actual budget, including that of Assemblywoman Nancy Munoz (R-21), who decried a \$2.7 billion structural deficit, and the budget prioritization of baseball fields over hospitals. “We should be doing a better job,” she said. “I can't say how disappointed I am that University Hospital didn't get more money. The City of Newark de-

serves more respect.”

Assemblywoman Shavonda Sumter (D-35) stuck up for the \$54.3 billion bill.

“I’m excited about this budget,” she said. “I do think care was given throughout the countless hours of meetings to hear what the concerns were from the southernmost tip to the northernmost tip of this state.”

It volleyed back and forth like that for a while.

Assemblyman Brian Rumpf (R-9) complained about the more than one billion dollars in the budget since the governor’s budget address, without explanation.

“Christmas Tree items,” said Rumpf. “We’re setting a new record today, a new record for budget deficits – \$2.7 billion deficit in the current budget, more than one billion than the worst of the Corzine years.”

Bergen complained about a lack of transparency in the entire process, and blamed a strong-arming front office and subservient Democratic legislature. “This budget was prepared by the governor, behind closed

doors. When the budget was finally given, nobody got a chance to read it,” Bergen said.

Wearied but not to the point of losing a sense of moral outrage, state Senator Mike Testa (R-1) called the process a “mess”.

“It is a sad day,” he added. “It’s disgusting. This is the most egregious insult to transparency since I have been a member of the State Legislature. A \$2.7 billion deficit. It’s easy for you to say, ‘We’ll give you whatever you want.’ It’s much more difficult to deliver on those promises. You’re going to have to raise taxes to pay for this stuff. There is no other option. It is a fact that the governor is \$20 billion higher than the last administration. I am ashamed to be sitting here with you, voting on a budget done in this manner.”

Assemblyman Raj Mukherji (D-31) made a case for the budget.

“Historic investments and the pinnacle of fiscal responsibilities,” he said. “Eleven credit downgrades. This year’s budget includes a \$10.2 billion surplus, which protects us against future economic downturns. Two million New Jerseyans saw property tax relief as a consequence of ANCHOR. This year, today we have an opportunity to build on that, with a full pension payment, for a third consecutive year.”

“That \$10 billion should go back to the people who gave it to us,” Assemblyman Bob Auth (R-39) shot back.

Bergen chastised Mukherji.

“You’re on the budget committee and you don’t know what’s in the bill,” said the Morris Republican. “It’s not a \$10 billion surplus, those are old numbers. It’s \$8.73 billion.”

Mukherji again rose.

“Despite Democrats telling the public that the budget was done days ago and blaming yesterday’s delays and mistakes in the budget and score sheets on the hard-working staff at OLS,



**Agudath Israel
of America**

everyone paying attention knows the truth,” said the Republican. “The blame for the last-minute rush, the inaccurate score sheet, and the lack of an actual budget bill that anyone could review at time the bill was approved late last night lies squarely at the feet of Democrat leaders.



“They want to hide their own feeding frenzy of pork that lasted almost until midnight when the budget had to be adopted to prevent a government shutdown. This is cowardly and belies the Democrats’ disdain for the public, press, the legislative process, and transparency. It’s disappointing that Democrats are willing to throw the people who worked the hardest for them under the bus to deflect blame for their own failures. We know who’s really to blame.”

The last-minute body dumping,

numbers dumping, mind-numbing and ho-humming exercise came against the backdrop of Democrats ballyhooing the StayNJ proposal made by Speaker Coughlin, which looked great in the waning hours of rushed and hushed budget committees (enough to get the backing of the GOP), and by midnight of the final week looked, dangerously, even by the reckoning of its backers in irony addled off-the-record interactions, like lipstick on a gorilla-in-the-room-sized pig.

Lungs-searing smog from Canadian wildfires threatened to suffocate the population in Trenton, while providing more obfuscation in the interest of majority lawmakers intent on a shadowy full-court press.

Politics intruded with a vengeance.

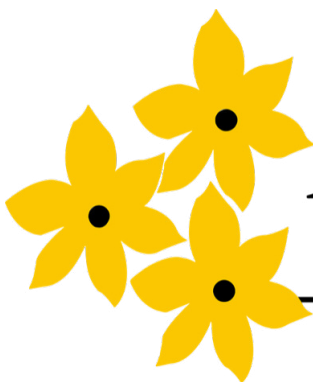
If Coughlin could wrangle some political capital out of the senior citizens’ assistance program, his upper chamber counterpart, state Senate President Nick Scutari (D-22), could perhaps improve his shot at another term on the throne by keeping the lights dimmed and the trains running *not on time* – but at a breakneck pace ahead of the

weekend deadline – a switchman with lightning reflexes.

“The bosses are watching,” har-rumped the same Churchill-friendly statehouse source, apparently in hallway hurry-up mode. “Nick has a real shot here” to blast the budget through with as few eyeballs as possible observing the damage, “er, the public good.”

“We are voting on what is in front of us,” Scutari told NJ Spotlight’s John Reitmeyer, before state Senate Majority Leader M. Teresa Ruiz (D-29) issued the following statement on the U.S. Supreme Court decision which will prevent institutions of higher education from considering a student’s race as a factor in its holistic review of each applicant for admissions:

“Born out of a recognition that historical inequities continue to plague society, affirmative action emerged as a remedy for the deep-rooted biases that hindered the progress of marginalized communities in this nation. Its purpose was not to perpetuate division, but to rectify the injustices of the past and dismantle deeply ingrained barriers, that challenged the status quo and paved the way towards a future where everyone



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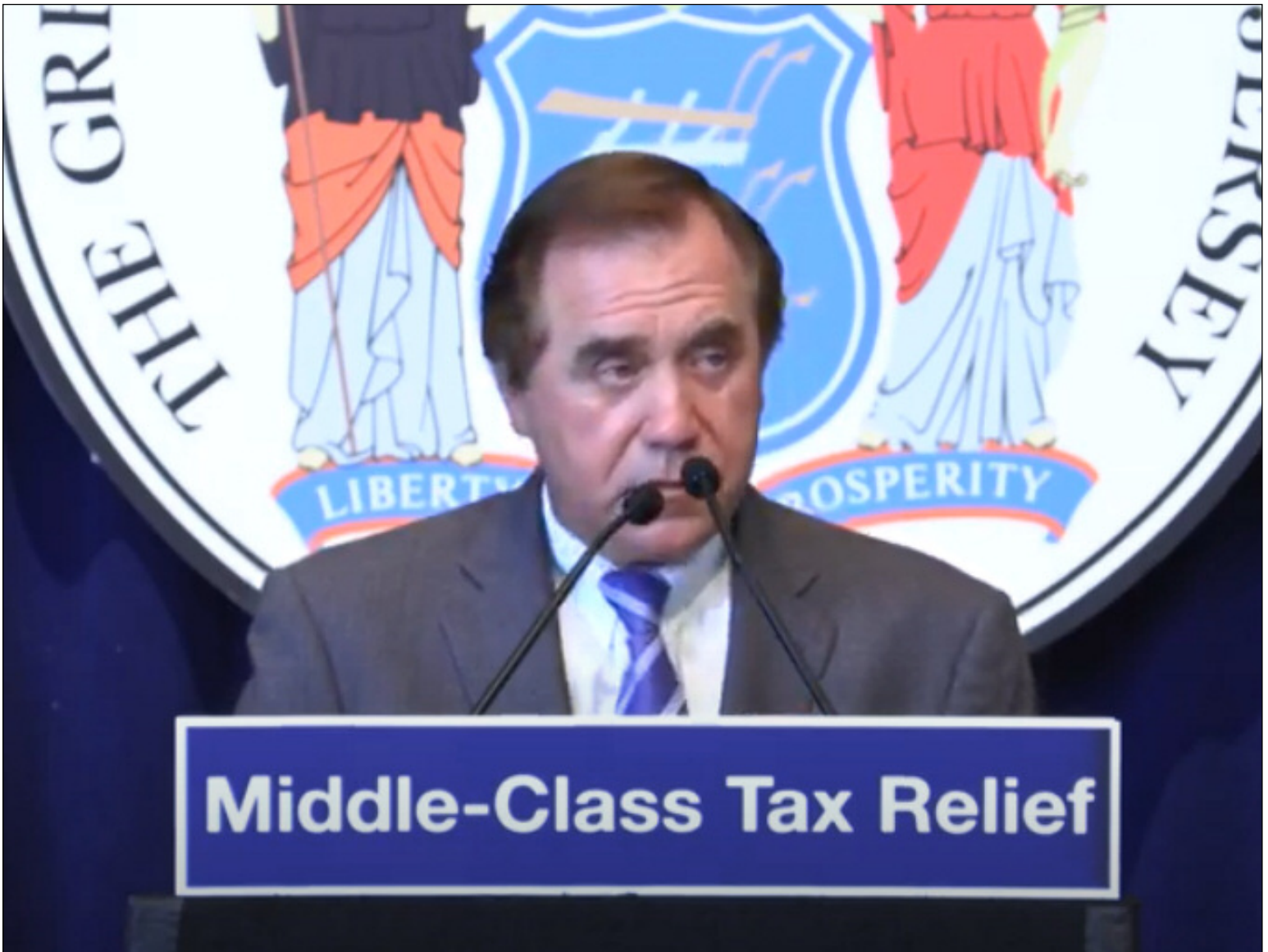
has an equal chance to thrive. Today's decision by the Supreme Court is profoundly disappointing and reminds us that the pursuit of equality is a complex struggle, requiring ongoing reflection and recalibration. I agree with Justice Ketanji Brown Jackson's statement in her dissent, 'If the colleges of this country are required to ignore a thing that matters, it will not just go away. It will take longer

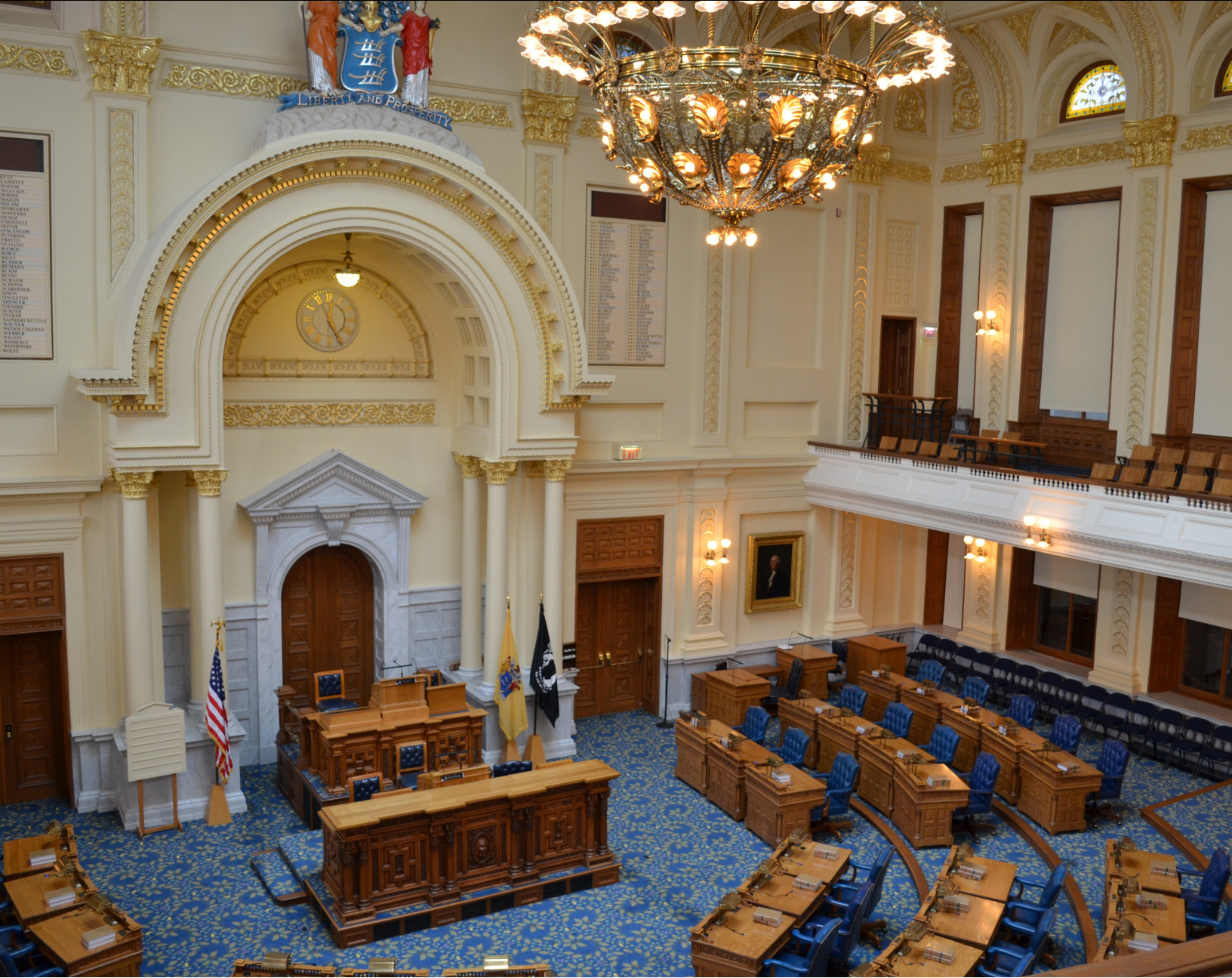
for racism to leave us. And, ultimately, ignoring race just makes it matter more.' We have a collective responsibility to confront systematic barriers and empower those who have been marginalized. Despite this blow, I am hopeful colleges and universities around the country may find a way to continue to consider the whole student they are admitting. Our students are much more than

GPA's and standardized test scores and they deserve to be considered for the individual they are and the rich diverse perspectives and lived experiences that they bring to the table."

Outrage, in fact, abided.

For his part, Murphy radiated feverishly accelerated optimism.





'NO DORKY ENDZONE DANCE' AND OTHER OBSERVATIONS

No dorky endzone dance punctuated the inartful day of incubator feeding once the legislature had done its (secretive) job, as as Murphy convened a horde of Democratic Party allies to stand in the camera frame while he flourished a pen, sported a grin, and satisfied his penchant for theater with a mere John Hancock where it counts.

Yes, this amounted to the final statehouse set-piece in a smog-glutted, dreary series of cloak-room set-pieces prefacing the inevitable: Murphy's signature

on the Fiscal Year 2024 Appropriations Act.



"This budget will make a difference for folks sitting around the kitchen table," said the governor.

"Folks."

"Sitting around."

"Kitchen table."

If the rhetoric didn't exactly carry overtones of Bernard of Clairvaux, it nonetheless bore all the hallmarks of these times, chosen carefully to connect with simple souls fire-blanketed as "folks," who don't fight crusades (or command round tables) so much as sit around *kitchen* tables.

Joined by Senate President Nick Scutari, Assembly Speaker Craig Coughlin, Senate Majority Leader Teresa Ruiz, Assembly Majority Leader Lou Greenwald, Senate Budget Chair Paul Sarlo, Assembly Budget Chair Eliana Pintor Marin, and Treasurer Elizabeth Muoio, Murphy accomplished the last movement of this season with aplomb if not the outright comic book grandeur that accompanies some of his events.

“A job well done,” said Scutari.

“Thanks for your great leadership,” Murphy put in.

Rendered all but lifeless by regional politics, South Jersey Democrats (Greenwald’s presence notwithstanding) tried to get some grumbling going in the shadows, about how “this would have NEVER happened with Steve [Sweeney] around,” but it felt hollow and bitter and, at last, unbuttressed by anything sustainable in this new world of New Jersey politics dominated by northern and Middlesex interests.

Getting choked up at one point, Greenwald gave the longest

speech at the podium.

Maybe he knew it was over, his place on the leadership squad no longer politically tenable.

“That was very powerful, Lou,” Murphy said, before summoning Sarlo.

Powerful is a powerful word.

Very powerful suggests new frontiers of potency.

Or spin.

Or spending.

According to Brenda Flanagan of *NJ Spotlight*:

*“The budget for the 2024 fiscal year, which starts July 1, doesn’t raise taxes, makes a full payment into state pension funds and increases aid to education. The new budget doubles the Earned Income Tax Credit to \$1,000 for each eligible child. It also increases “Anchor” property-tax relief by \$250 for homeowners and renters age 65 and over. The budget passed the Senate, 25 to 12. The Assembly approved the budget by 51 votes to 27, **mostly** along party lines.”*

Routinely contentedly lowkey to the point of outright opacity, Coughlin spiked (his version!) of a budget football. “This is another year of expanding property tax relief,” said the speaker, “with cooperation of the governor and the senate president.”



Of course, the main addition on that particular point doesn’t kick in until 2026, which led to myriad howls of foul among the ranks of the GOP.

Coughlin carried on indomitably, even returning to the singular image likewise favored by the governor as that distinguishing and sustaining feature in the lives of New Jersey’s common folk. “The list goes on and on of the things that reflect not just the priorities of this group of people but the people [sitting around their kitchen tables],” he said.

Yes, barbarians – that is our term of preference for those who would not yield to someone



ROUND WORLD
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else's yoke – used to ransack and plunder from without, but at one point the enemy within figured out how to do the job itself.

Senator Joe Pennacchio (R-26) said Trenton Democrats sounded “cartoonish” with promises that they’ll deliver on their big property tax relief plan starting in 2026.

“Trenton Democrats are trying to buy votes this year with the promise they’ll deliver StayNJ property tax relief starting in 2026,” said Pennacchio. “They’re as believable as Wimpy from Popeye who promises, ‘I’ll gladly pay you Tuesday for a hamburger today.’”

An initial version of the StayNJ plan proposed making the first payments to property taxpayers in 2025. A new version of the plan agreed to by New Jersey’s three Democratic leaders would

delay payments until 2026 at the earliest.

“If StayNJ is really affordable and sustainable and something New Jerseyans should expect to provide relief for years to come, why make them wait three years to get a first payment?” Pennacchio asked. “The Democrats’ dark secret is that the flood of federal COVID cash is drying up. They can’t guarantee they’ll be able to fund the program they’re promising today in 2026, even though they’ll campaign on it this fall. It’s completely disingenuous and it defies belief.”

In contrast to the Democrats’ flimsy promises of tax relief years down the line, Senate Republicans have proposed providing \$4.3 billion of immediate “Give It Back” property tax relief to towns and counties using idle funds that have already been set aside for debt relief.

The Republican plan would deliver the funds to local governments within 30 days of passage, ensuring immediate tax relief for property taxpayers.

“Republicans believe New Jerseyans deserve property tax relief today, not three years from now,” Pennacchio added. “Unlike what Democrats have proposed with StayNJ, there’s no opportunity for a bait and switch with our ‘Give It Back’ plan. Since the money is in the bank right now, we believe we should provide property tax relief right now.”

Right.

Now.

In New Jersey (where else!), it sounded like a long way away.

But then again, so was the fall of the Roman Empire.



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