



# McGreevey's Debt

**H**ere is how you can tell it's winter: The trees are bare, the temperature is below freezing, it gets dark early, and Jim McGreevey is testing campaign themes.

For the moment, he's settled on New Jersey's bonded indebtedness as the centerpiece of his second gubernatorial campaign, an issue usually seen as so arcane that it has no politically expedient value.

So, we can anticipate some McGreevey speeches over the next several weeks and months on the evils of public debt and why his listeners should support his candidacy because he's brought that evil to their attention. He's hoping, of course, that his audience will rise as one, thrust clenched fists into the air, and drive the money changers from office. The listeners are just as apt, however, to remain seated, heads drooping on chests, fighting a losing battle against the glaze that's steadily creeping into their eyes.

Government debt is nothing new. The U.S. government has been mired in it for decades, and candidates for Congress who conduct campaigns based on debt as an issue seldom win. The federal government simply continues to finance the debt. At least here in New Jersey, we have the good sense to pay it off.

Even as governor, McGreevey would be powerless to do anything about the state's current bonded debt because those obligations already have been incurred. He can only promise that he will not add to the debt, a promise he will find exceedingly difficult to keep.

The state's capital needs will continue, whether it is modernizing transportation systems, expanding state colleges to provide space for students, or preserving open space in a state that is already the most densely populated in the country. Those needs arise on an ongoing basis and will not come to an end simply because a candidate for governor thinks the state's taxpayers shouldn't finance them.

If debt is the issue, specifics are the answer. For example, does McGreevey feel transportation improvements should not be funded by bond issues? Well, try telling that to commuters who spend each morning and evening pounding their steering wheels while traffic backs up on any number of highways in the state.

Or does he stand in opposition to the dredging of deepwater ports to maintain a multi-billion dollar shipping industry in New Jersey? Well, try telling that to the thousands of workers whose jobs would evaporate as other East Coast ports took over the business.

Does he oppose the use of bond funds for construction of facilities for the developmentally disabled? Try telling that to parents and relatives who, through no fault of their own, can no longer care for a loved one and must make the agonizing decision to place that person in a state facility.

Is McGreevey offended by the use of bonded debt to build classrooms and dormitories at state colleges? Try telling that to deserving high school students who desire to further their education but can't because there's no room for them.

All of these projects have been funded in the past by bond issues, along with the preservation of open space, demolition of unsafe structures in urban centers, water conservation and wastewater treatment, and protection of the shoreline.

McGreevey has most recently criticized the Whitman administration for proposing that the state assume some \$8 billion to \$10 billion in debt to build new schools in virtually every community in the state. Well, he should explain his opposition to the parents, their children, and the teachers in schools, mostly in the inner cities, where ceilings are falling in and where the cold wind whistles through broken and cracked window frames in structures built a century ago.

McGreevey will discover that if he's going to campaign against bond issues, he must discuss what would he do. Perhaps he will support pay-as-you-go financing and

fund only those projects affordable in each annual budget. That will lead inevitably to worthy and necessary projects being delayed for years, not to mention annual uncertainty over revenues and expenditures.

It also means that dilapidated schools would stay that way, despite a state Supreme Court ruling to undertake construction and renovation (another problem for McGreevey). The most compelling need for new schools is in the state's urban centers whose residents compose a large chunk of the Democratic Party's base (an even bigger problem for McGreevey). And, if the state doesn't finance school construction in urban New Jersey, it must be done with local resources and that means property tax increases (how is he going to explain that?)

Clearly, McGreevey is searching for issues which resonate with the voters, similar to his experience in 1997 when he tapped into anger and frustration over high auto insurance costs and rising property taxes and nearly rode that wave into an upset victory over Governor Whitman. He's not going to find that resonance in a discussion of bonded debt.

In the meantime, acting Governor Donald DiFrancesco, the presumptive Republican nominee for governor, will spend his time discussing increased home-stead rebates, health care reforms, water quality programs, increased state aid to local governments, and renewal of the Transportation Trust Fund.

To be fair, McGreevey has mentioned other issues, such as restoring the Department of the Public Advocate (how many people, I wonder, are aware that it's gone?) and eliminating the hideous practice of racial profiling (something already undertaken by the current administration despite being ignored by several previous administrations).

McGreevey will discover what many have been thinking for quite some time — that he peaked in 1997, and that his task in developing cutting issues this time around is considerably more difficult.

So, in the next few months, the mayor of Woodbridge will test campaign themes, searching for some that work, or else this winter of discontent will be followed by a fall of disappointment.

*Carl Golden is vice president of DKB & Partners, Morristown. He previously served as communications director for Republican Governors Whitman and Kean, as well as for the New Jersey Supreme Court.*