Florio tries to calm

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(990)

EAST BRUNSWICK — Seeking to put the best face on Tuesday's election setback, Governor Florio told a crowd of the state's wealthiest lobbyists and corporate figures Thursday evening that "I'm proud to be a Democrat."

But there was a palpable sense of foreboding among some party operatives at the Governor's Gala, a \$2 million-plus party fund-raiser at the Ramada Renaissance Hotel in East Brunswick.

Several said the party will have

to work hard to overcome voter outrage over Florio's tax hike and school aid plan.

"There are a lot of people who are really worried," one former Democratic official said. "They look at this as 'apocalypse now.' I don't think it's that bad; a lot can change in a year."

State Assemblyman William Pascrell, D-Paterson, said the party was dealt a severe setback Tuesday, but he praised Florio for agreeing to consider making changes.

"We got our clock cleaned,

there's no question about that," Pascrell said. "We have to regroup."

State Sen. Gabriel Ambrosio, D-Lyndhurst, also praised Florio for saying he would take another look at his policies.

"I believe that was the right thing to do, because we have to start a dialogue," with opponents of the program, he said.

As the revelers partied nearby, members of Hands Across New Jersey, the anti-tax group that helped mobilize opposition to the Florio plan, held a press confer-

Democrats' fears

ence at the hotel to hail the election results.

"We consider the results of the election to be a complete vindication of the tax revolt," said Janet Coates, a spokeswoman for the group.

Organizers of the fund-raiser said that 1,370 people bought tickets at \$1,500 each. It was attended by some of the state's most powerful and politically connected special interests — power brokers ranging from developers and bank executives to lobbyists and labor

From Page A-1 union officials.

The gloomy mood comes on the heels of several stunning setbacks for Democrats in New Jersey on Tuesday.

Voters rejected a \$135 million affordable-housing bond issue proposed by Florio.

In South Jersey, Democrats suffered a bruising defeat when Edward H. Salmon lost a special election for a state Senate seat to Republican James Cafiero.

Democrats reportedly spent more than \$700,000 on that race, which was viewed by many as a referendum on the Florio tax hikes. Republicans said they spent less than half that amount.

But the biggest setback occurred in the race between Democrat Bill Bradley and Republican Christine Todd Whitman for the U.S. Sen-



ate. Bradley, who was thought to hold a solid, double-digit lead going into the election, barely survived, winning by a more two percentage points. Many analysts said the heavy vote against Bradley stemmed from Florio's tax hikes and Bradley's refusal to take a stand on them.

At a post-election press conference Wednesday, the embattled governor accepted the blame for the Republican gains, and invited key interest groups to begin talks on revising the tax package. Later, aides scurried about the State House explaining to reporters that Florio would not back off the core elements of his program.

Still, Florio said Thursday night he was well aware of voter disaffection.

"Tuesday, on Election Day, the people sent us a message," Florio said. "They put us on notice that they want to be more involved in what we're doing."