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AT ISSUE *By Melanie Willoughby, Senior Vice President*

More Change Coming in 2011

In 2010, the biggest buzzword in Trenton was “reform.” Governor Chris Christie pursued a reform agenda—regulatory reform, state pension and benefit reform, education reform and property tax reform, to name a few. In 2011, the new catchword will be “change,” as members of the state Legislature face reelection in what, thanks to redistricting, may be very different legislative districts than the ones they now represent.

Governor Chris Christie emphasized the change theme in his first State of the State address in January 2011, declaring, “The change we are working to achieve for New Jersey is transformational.” Indeed, he can point to a great deal of accomplishments in his first year—cutting red tape, a 2 percent cap on property tax increases, a balanced budget with no tax increases, and cuts to excessive public employee benefits.

The Democratic Legislature has worked with the Republican Governor on many of these issues. The property-tax-cap law was a compromise, as was arbitration reform, which should help rein in some excessive public employee raises. And Governor Christie was only in office for two months when lawmakers sent him bills to roll back past pension increases, cap the amount of unused sick leave payouts a public employee can receive when he or she retires, and require public employees to contribute toward the cost of their health benefits. Christie signed the bills right away.

But now it’s those same legislators who are facing change. Not only are all 120 legislative seats up for election this year, many legislative districts will be newly constituted as New Jersey undertakes the process of redrawing their boundaries.

Redistricting takes place every 10 years when the states are required to redraw the boundaries of their legislative and Congressional districts according to population changes recorded in the U.S. Census. Because New Jersey is one of four states that holds its state elections in odd numbered years, redistricting occurs earlier here than in most states.

New Jersey uses a bipartisan commission to draw new legislative maps. An equal number of Democrats and Republicans will attempt to develop a map that both sides can agree upon. If they reach an impasse, an

independent commissioner will be appointed by the Chief Justice of the NJ Supreme Court to break the stalemate.

At this writing, the Census data has not yet been made public. But reporter Mark Magyar has analyzed New Jersey’s redistricting using state population projections from 2009 and published his report on www.njspotlight.com.



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According to Magyar, some of the biggest population gains are in traditionally Republican counties like Monmouth, Ocean and Somerset, while some of the biggest population losses are in the urban northeast of the state where Democrats are the majority. Magyar estimates that the population of each district will be approximately 217,000, an increase of about 7,000 since the year 2000. If these population shifts are born out in the official Census data, Democratic districts in the northeast could become more competitive or be cut altogether, while the number of districts in Republican areas could grow.

At present, Democrats hold a 24-16-seat margin in the Senate and a 47-33-seat majority in the Assembly. During the past 20 years, the party that won the redistricting battle went on to capture control of the Legislature — the Republicans in 1990, the Democrats in 2010.

To be sure, the November 2011 election will be about more than just the changing boundaries. New legislative districts are just one more change impacting public policy decisions in an era that is becoming defined by sweeping change in New Jersey. **NJB**