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Christie Vetoes Atlantic City Rescue Package

Measure was among dozens of bills to expire on governor's desk Tuesday

By **KATE KING**

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New Jersey Gov. Chris Christie allowed more than five dozen bills to expire on his desk Tuesday, including a financial-aid package for Atlantic City and a measure that would have increased the state's legal smoking age to 21.

Mr. Christie's decision not to sign legislation aimed at helping Atlantic City's finances sparked criticism from lawmakers who said they had reworked the bills based on comments from the governor. State lawmakers have been trying for



Gov. Chris Christie at a campaign stop in Ames, Iowa, on Saturday. *PHOTO: PATRICK SEMANSKY/ASSOCIATED PRESS*

more than a year to pass legislation to send money to Atlantic City and stabilize property taxes for the city's casinos.

In November, the governor, who is running for the Republican presidential nomination, conditionally vetoed several bills designed to buoy the struggling resort town, saying they didn't adequately force the city to reduce spending.

Lawmakers then scrambled to pass four reworked bills in the final hours of the legislative session that ended last week, only to see them again die on the governor's desk this week.

State Sen. Jim Whelan, a Democrat who represents Atlantic City, called the governor's move "bizarre."

"Gov. Christie has vetoed his own bills. Clearly, our 'tell it like it is' governor does not mean what he says," said Mr. Whelan, referring to Mr. Christie's

campaign slogan.

Assemblyman Vincent Mazzeo, a Democrat, said he believes the veto is connected to a recent proposal to put Atlantic City's administration and finances under state control. The legislation, introduced last week, would essentially strip local leaders of all powers, including their control of city-owned assets.

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Mr. Christie's office declined to comment on the governor's decision on Atlantic City. A spokesman pointed to comments the governor made Saturday while campaigning in Iowa, when he said he would sign the Atlantic City bills only if "the total package makes sense."

Atlantic City, which is facing a \$30.5 million budget deficit, is expected to run out of cash by April, according to a report by Atlantic City's state-appointed emergency manager, Kevin Lavin. Four Atlantic City casinos have closed over the past year and the city has lost \$200 million to property-tax appeals.

A spokesman for Atlantic City's mayor didn't return a request for comment on Tuesday.

Dennis Levinson, the executive for Atlantic County, said he agreed with the governor's veto. Mr. Levinson, a Republican, said a provision of the property-tax

stabilization bill that delayed a review of the program's effectiveness until 2028 was particularly ill-advised.

"It was a bold move because he's going to come under a lot of criticism, particularly because he's running for president," Mr. Levinson said of Mr. Christie. "But he most certainly did the right thing."

On Tuesday, the governor signed 93 bills into law and declined to sign 65 others. Among those he approved was legislation aimed at supporting veterans and a bill authorizing \$25 million in state tax credits for infrastructure projects at Rutgers University.

Under state law, the governor can issue so-called pocket vetoes on legislation passed in the final 10 days of the session. By withholding his signature, the governor effectively kills the measure because the Legislature doesn't get an opportunity to override his decision as it does with a typical veto.

Mr. Christie's spokesman said passing more than 100 bills at session's end in a "hasty and scrambled way, praying for them to be rubber-stamped, is never a good formula for effectively doing public business."

One of the bills Mr. Christie declined to sign would have raised the state's legal age for purchasing tobacco products to 21 from 19. Had he signed the legislation, New Jersey would have become the second state in the country, after Hawaii, to increase its smoking age to 21.

Supporters of the legislation said increasing the legal smoking age would save lives and government money spent on health care for smoking-related illnesses.

Opponents said the proposed law wouldn't prevent underage smoking and

would hurt small businesses.

Karen Blumenfeld, executive director of the antitobacco nonprofit Global Advisors on Smokefree Policy, said the governor's decision was a "travesty."

"We do hope that the governor reconsiders his position ... especially in light of his heartfelt remarks in regards to his family member being addicted to smoking and the tragedy that his family went through," Ms. Blumenfeld said, referring to public comments Mr. Christie has made about his mother, a longtime smoker who battled lung cancer.

Sal Risalvato, executive director of the New Jersey Gasoline, C-Store and Automotive Association, an industry advocate, applauded the governor's decision. He said increasing the state's smoking age wouldn't prevent young people from smoking and would hurt small businesses.

"It's feel-good legislation that won't accomplish anything," Mr. Risalvato said.

State Sen. Richard Codey, a Democrat who sponsored the bill, said he has already reintroduced the bill and expects lawmakers will again send it to the governor's desk this legislative session.

Mr. Christie also declined to approve legislation that would have required gun retailers to sell so-called smart guns, which are designed to be fired only by an authorized user. The bill would have required gun stores to sell these guns alongside their other firearms.

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