

Sweeney: Pass pension reforms, then pass state budget

Written by

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State Senate President Stephen M. Sweeney said Thursday that pension and health benefits reform must be passed before the state budget is adopted in June.

Sweeney, a Democrat from Gloucester County, said in a meeting with reporters that changes must occur this spring to save the system, which faces some \$110 billion in long-term deficits.

Sweeney, a leader for an ironworkers union, acknowledged that negotiations with Gov. Chris Christie and development of a full reform package had dragged on longer than expected. Sweeney had initially set this month as the time to pass a package.

Both pension and health care packages must be passed together, Sweeney said. But he emphasized that it must occur soon to save a system for the state's 808,000 current or retired employees.

Sweeney warned that public union members would undoubtedly be contributing a greater share of their

salaries to sustain their pensions, just as trades union members are paying more.

He said he is often criticized by public union members for saying so, but, he added, "it is outrageous to think that way. It's outrageous to think (public sector unions) are doing things the way they're doing them, and telling their members everything will be OK."

Sweeney also said he could not guarantee enough support from other Democratic senators to provide a majority vote by Democrats alone on a reform measure.

"I never said there'd be 21 votes in the Democratic caucus," Sweeney said. "I never went into it for that. People have strong feelings on this."

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