

Gloucester County Times

May 17, 2012 Thursday

Christie on the road ...again

By Jenna Portnoy

If it seems like Gov. Chris Christie is often out of state, turning up in front of a lectern in California or at a rally in Wisconsin, that's because he is.

A review of his calendar shows the governor has been on the road 54 days in the past eight months, starting when he was elected vice chairman of the Republican Governors Association.

The Christie road show has taken him out of state more than one and a half days a week, on average, according to a catalog compiled from interviews, his public schedule and documents, and confirmed by the governor's office. The list does not include personal trips to New York City or Philadelphia for dinner with his wife, Mary Pat, or to the Super Bowl with his younger son, Patrick.

In addition to the numerous trips to New York, Philadelphia and Washington, he has been to 14 states: California, Delaware, Florida, Indiana, Illinois, Iowa, Louisiana, Maryland, Massachusetts, Mississippi, Missouri, New Hampshire, Ohio and Wisconsin.

Tom Wilson, a former state Republican chairman, said that although there might eventually be residual benefits, for now Christie is giving more than he's getting from politicians eager to share a stage with him.

"You stand next to someone whose light is a little brighter than yours so you can come out of the shadows and capture some of that," Wilson said.

As he put it: "Jon Corzine didn't invite Barack Obama to New Jersey during the campaign because Barack Obama needed Jon Corzine... Who's going to do that for this governor? There aren't that many luminaries out there. There are not that many really bright lights."

n

Crisscrossing the country, Christie has delivered rousing campaign speeches for fellow Republicans like Scott Walker, the embattled governor of Wisconsin, as well as wonkish policy speeches at the **Cato Institute** in Washington and at the George W. Bush Center in New York, where he warned the nation could become a "paternalistic entitlement society."

He'll be back in the air Saturday to deliver a speech in Kentucky, followed by a trip to Chicago next month.

Christie is not the state's first governor to travel the country spreading political

goodwill. For instance, former Gov. Christie Whitman visited 15 states one year and traveled overseas frequently on trade missions.

Like his predecessors, Christie also knows when to stay put, said Carl Golden, who was a press secretary to both Whitman and former Gov. Tom Kean.

"(Christie's) out of state travel, we take a lot of pride in it," Golden said, "but it hurts if the perception grows that he's placing New Jersey second to his own travels. Then I think people will turn and begin to question why he spends so much time out of state."

But Bill Palatucci, a national committeeman who watched Kean's ascent, first as a driver and ultimately as his campaign manager, said that while Christie's speaking requests are "endless," spanning Alaska to Toronto and in between, he has been judicious about which ones to accept.

"Once people see him and meet him and listen to him, they just can't get enough of him," he said.

Not surprisingly, the trips have helped drive speculation that Christie is embellishing his national profile in hopes that Mitt Romney, the presumptive Republican presidential candidate, will turn to him as a running mate.

Or perhaps he's simply touring the country holding fundraisers for fellow Republicans, collecting IOU's should he chose to seek the presidency in 2016.

For now, Christie insists he loves his job and does not plan to leave it anytime soon - a claim not everyone takes at face value.

"For a job that he professes to love so much, he spends a lot of time away from it," said Assemblyman John Wisniewski (D-Middlesex), chairman of the state Democratic Party. "Is he really still interested in being governor, or is he auditioning for being vice president?"

Michael Drewniak, the governor's spokesman, declined to address Christie's political aspirations, but called him the "most hands-on, 24-hours-a-day, seven-days-a-week governor we could hope for."

"Governor Christie has a good positive story to tell about New Jersey and leadership," Drewniak said. "Any time he can bring that message to a wider audience is positive for New Jersey and perhaps instructive for other leaders."

Still, State Sen. Loretta Weinberg (D-Bergen) questioned the governor's priorities, noting that he has never made the time to address the 1,000 women who attend his annual Governor's Conference on Women in Atlantic City.

"If he wants to spread the New Jersey story," Weinberg said, "that was a great place to do it, particularly when it comes to the kind of issues that are of interest to women and their families."

She questioned how Christie could criticize lawmakers who hold other government jobs and amass vacation and sick leave to come to Trenton when the governor frequently travels outside the state to campaign and make political speeches.

"If he wants to criticize everyone else, maybe when he's doing a purely political junket," she said, "then he should turn over that many days of his salary back to the state taxpayers."

Weinberg sparred with Christie last year over how he notified the public of his travel after it was disclosed that he made a secret trip to Vail, Colo., to address a gathering of Republicans brought together by the conservative billionaire brothers David and Charles Koch.

Since then, Christie's staff has generally let the press know when he is about to leave the state and return. Less consistent is the practice of notifying Lt. Gov. Kim Guadagno, who is acting governor when Christie travels.

A request under the state's Open Public Records Act yielded 13 letters during an eight-month period when he made 30 trips.

Costs for political travel should be covered by the political party or campaign that extended the invitation, according to a code of conduct Christie adopted early in his first year in office.

But there is no doubt who pays to protect Christie when he's away - the state taxpayers. While in Israel, troopers and private security firms under contract cost \$40,000, but the State Police, citing security concerns, denied a request to detail expenses when troopers trail Christie around the country.

Despite his robust travel schedule, few have accused Christie of falling short on the job because of absences from the state - at least not since the end of his first year in office, when a family vacation to Disney World coincided with a crippling snowstorm.

Even as Christie's red tour bus rambled through the Israeli countryside in April during his weeklong trip, he found time to huddle with aides and to answer his BlackBerry.

As he said during a February news conference, "My travel out of state is always going to be governed by my ability to leave here and make sure everything that is being handled and taken care of the right way."