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Christie in N.H.: Cut benefits for the rich

Christie also wants to raise the retirement age to 69 and raise early retirement to 64, according to advisers with his presidential political action committee.

By Bob Jordan

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MANCHESTER, N.H. — Gov. Chris Christie unveiled a potentially high-risk, high-reward strategy to reboot his nascent presidential campaign, saying he favors cuts in popular entitlement programs, including eliminating benefits for some high-income individuals.

Perhaps underscoring his bold gamble, Christie also said for the first time that he felt he was “ready” to run for president. That admission, made in an interview with Yahoo News, is important, because in 2012 Christie repeatedly said he wasn’t ready to run. That he feels ready now would seem to push the New Jersey governor that much closer to entering the race.

His entitlement reform plan seemed designed to do the same. In a policy speech at St. Anselm College, Christie told residents of the state with the first presidential primary that there should be means testing, so high-income seniors receive smaller payouts through Social Security and pay more for health care under Medicare.

Those changes and 10 more proposals Christie offered — including a gradual raising of the retirement age to 69 and early retirement to 64 — would shave \$1 trillion from federal deficits over a decade, the governor said. Christie said he wants to exempt current beneficiaries.

“I know some in both political parties will criticize these ideas,” Christie said. “These are the truths you all know in your gut. I want to give voice to those common sense truths that we already know.”

The Republican governor became the first of those eyeing a path to the White House in 2016 to wade into the specific policy debates about the future of Social Security and Medicare, popular entitlement programs that have long been the subject of reform discussions, but not actual reforms.

“He should be applauded for being willing to say what has to be said,” said retiree Bill MacKenzie, among the crowd to greet Christie. He said younger generations will “curse” his generation if there is no action on keeping entitlement programs solvent.

MacKenzie said other candidates in recent presidential cycles considered the topic a “lightning rod.” Christie himself noted that “there’s no political upside” in campaigning on reforms.

The policy speech gave Christie, who has finished in the back of the pack in recent polls on the GOP field, a chance to grab some attention in a week that has been dominated by announcements from Democrat Hillary Clinton and Republican Marco Rubio that they are formally launching campaigns.

Christie drew sharp responses from Democrats, with Rep. Bill Pascrell of Passaic County in a statement saying that “one of the most unpopular governors in the country is unveiling what will soon become one of the most unpopular entitlement reform plans.”

“Gov. Christie has decided that the only way to rein in entitlement spending is on the backs of seniors. This couldn’t be more wrong,” Pascrell said.

The Christie plan would affect those with non-Social Security income of over \$80,000 per year and phase out payments entirely for those with more than \$200,000 a year of other income.

This is the first of two New Hampshire trips Christie will make this week to rekindle his earlier appeal as a straight-talking problem-solver. On Wednesday, Christie will host the first leg of what his political action committee calls the “Tell It Like It Is” Town Hall Series.

Michael Tanner, the Cato Institute’s senior fellow specializing in social welfare policy, called Christie’s speech “very important, not because of his specific proposals, which were generally unimaginative, but because he made them at all. The growing national debt and the entitlement crisis that drives it remains a threat to our current economy and an unfair burden for our children and grandchildren. But so far the candidates for president have been surprisingly muted on the issue.

“This speech may or may not jump-start Christie’s stalled presidential campaign, but if it forces other candidates to address the issue, he will have already done the country an enormous favor,” Tanner said.