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Jersey comeback is Chris Christie's goal in New Hampshire

By Bob Jordan

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TRENTON – With the George Washington Bridge scandal casting a shadow over his White House hopes, Gov. Chris Christie this week travels to New Hampshire to state his case to the nation's first-primary voters.

He will face strong headwinds — polls showing him losing ground to the first and second tiers of the crowded GOP field. There also is uncertainty: the prospect for federal indictments stemming from the bridge scandal.

Reports last week indicated federal prosecutors are wrapping up their inquiry into the politically motivated toll-lane closures at the span in 2013, with charges possibly to follow as soon as this week.

Christie, however, has been undaunted, pinning his presidential hopes on the up-close-and-personal politics of the Granite State, where he will attend several events critical to making up ground on the GOP pack.

Christie isn't the first potential candidate to look to New Hampshire as the place to boost an underperforming campaign, said GOP donor Fred Malek, a Washington venture capitalist.

"I think his polling numbers show a little bit of trouble, but if there really is a path to victory for Chris Christie, this is it," Malek said of Christie's plans, which include hosting a pair of New Jersey-style town halls.

A nationwide survey of Republican voters by Monmouth University shows former Florida governor Jeb Bush in front with a 13 percent preference. Sen. Ted Cruz of Texas and Wisconsin Gov. Scott Walker are next, with 11 percent each. Christie is in a three-way tie for eighth place at 5 percent, according to the survey.

Christie hasn't formally announced his candidacy. He has said he'll make a decision on joining the race by late spring or early summer.

The support Christie does have could evaporate quickly, depending upon what news, if any, prosecutors bring.

A legislative inquiry last year found the lane closings were ordered by aides and allies of Christie, to settle a political score.

Christie, who has blamed subordinates for the scandal, has maintained all along that he had nothing to do with the lane closures, which caused epic traffic jams.

Malek noted other presidential candidates have successfully navigated similar uphill climbs thanks to a New Hampshire focus, such as Sen. John McCain of Arizona, whose campaign ran out of money in 2007.

McCain's organization had to cut its size and reduce operations. But McCain won the New Hampshire primary in February 2008 and, eventually, the party's nomination.

"If history is a guide, Christie has McCain to look to. McCain focused on barnstorming through New Hampshire, holding town halls, meeting with big groups and small groups," Malek said. "That kind of stuff is exactly what Christie is really good at."

As the site of the first-in-the-nation presidential primary (the next one is tentatively scheduled for Jan. 26, 2016), New Hampshire enjoys outsize political importance.

Christie, Bush, Cruz and Walker are among the 18 potential, exploratory and announced presidential candidates scheduled to speak at the Republican Leadership Summit in Nashua on April 17 and 18.

In addition to town halls he will host Wednesday and Friday, Christie is scheduled to deliver a speech Tuesday that will be a rollout of a "detailed proposal to address our long-term entitlements crisis," in a forum hosted by the New Hampshire Institute of Politics in Manchester, according to officials with Christie's leadership political action committee.

Cato Institute senior fellow Michael Tanner said the speech will reveal how far Christie will go — and where other candidates might follow — in order to reform entitlements.

Tanner said national debt has reached \$18 trillion, with Medicare, Medicaid and Social Security "real drivers."

"Are they willing to take the political heat in order to reform the entitlements?" Tanner said.

Tanner said Christie has voiced support for raising the retirement age and limiting cost-of-living adjustments, and has enacted some of those steps for pensions at the state level.

But Tanner said Christie will have to convince skeptics, including those in New Jersey, that he can fully reform entitlements.

Christie said in 2011 that state pension reforms he implemented would “bring to an end years of broken promises and fiscal mismanagement by securing the long-term solvency of the pension and benefit systems,” but he has spent recent months calling for more changes fiercely opposed by public workers.