

# Opinion: Oh, for the good old days of disorderly and chaotic budget presentations

CARL GOLDEN | FEBRUARY 24, 2021 | [OPINION](#), [BUDGET](#)

Gov. Phil Murphy's latest budget address was 'a jarring reminder that something called coronavirus has wrought life-altering and tragic change to government and everyday existence'



Carl Golden

It is altogether fitting perhaps that the setting for the governor's budget presentation to the Legislature reflected the somber, uneasy environment which has enveloped the state for a year.

There was no ceremonial introduction delivered by the Senate president from the speaker's rostrum in the Assembly chamber, no waiting in the vestibule to begin the slow walk down the chamber's center aisle to a standing ovation, no hand-clasping or brief pauses for a quick word of encouragement, no handshakes with the speaker and Senate president, and no raising of arms to quiet the applause.

Rather, Gov. Phil Murphy in a pre-recorded message stood behind a podium on an empty stage and addressed a deserted auditorium to deliver what has become the new normal — a virtual presentation viewed by an audience throughout the state on communication devices which, not too many years ago, were props in Star Trek re-runs.

There were no applause lines, no spontaneous audience rising to its feet while cheers flowed down from the gallery as the governor laid out his plan to spend \$44.8 billion in the 2022 fiscal year.

For a governor, the budget message is the ultimate "put your money where your mouth is" moment and doing so in eerie silence robs the chief executive of what is normally a warmly favorable response.

For all accustomed to the celebratory, quasi-festive atmosphere surrounding joint legislative sessions hosting the governor in prior years, it was a jarring reminder that

something called coronavirus has wrought life-altering and tragic change to government and everyday existence.

## **Descending on the State House**

Like the governor's annual State of the State message — the only other comparable event — the delivery of the proposed budget usually brought to the halls of the State House a cross section of individuals to whom government provided a livelihood, dozens of political party apparatchiks, and those who simply wanted to be present to drink in the atmosphere of a major government happening.

The political cognoscenti rubbed elbows with the policy wonks despite differing agendas. The former group was not interested in columns of figures, number-crunching or bean-counting while the latter spent their time intently studying the often arcane budget language for clues to an administration's vision and priorities.

It's been said the state budget is 10% a fiscal document and 90% a political document. One can argue with the ratio, but the politics-driven as well as the policy-driven understand the underlying truth in that observation and approach it with that firmly in mind.

Lobbyists — when not trading the latest insider information with one another — scurried about to advance the welfare of their clients.

Private interest groups fanned out through the corridors, seeking support for their causes. Expressions of delight were heard from those treated kindly in the spending plan while groans of frustration could be heard from those who felt short-changed. A second chance awaited them to make their case directly to the legislative committees to either include them in the budget or restore proposed cuts. Budget delivery day was none too soon to begin.

## **Rumors, gossip, speculation and predictions**

For the media, it was a moveable feast as legislators, governor's office staff, and the political intelligentsia vied for attention. It was an opportunity to vacuum up rumors, gossip, speculation, predictions and information from sources who swore they had not shared it with anyone else.

It was a bazaar where anyone could sample tidbits of intelligence to be filed away for use later or swapped with others embarked on similar missions.

That colorful past has been victimized as well by a cruel disease which strikes at random and, for many months, has defied all efforts at controlling and eliminating it.

For nearly a year, the talk has been of masks, social distancing, lockdowns, disinfectant agents, effective hygienic practices and — in hopeful tones — vaccines.

Nearly 700,000 New Jerseyans have contracted the virus and more than 22,000 have died.

Schools were shuttered and “remote learning” and “curbside pickup” entered the vernacular. Restaurants could no longer serve guests, entertainment venues went dark, concerts and athletic events canceled and businesses failed.

## **Inevitable casualty of the pandemic**

That an occasion like a gubernatorial address would become a casualty of the pandemic was inevitable.

I participated in 20 budget message events — nine as a staffer in the Assembly, eight as press secretary to Gov. Thomas H. Kean and three as communications director for Gov. Christie Whitman.

All were occasions to look forward to. Despite the rambunctious atmosphere and the knowledge that what would be heard during the day was frequently outrageously self-serving, it was a demonstration of democracy and representative government at its best.

The time will come again when crowds return to State House halls and the din of hundreds of conversations will fill the air.

The next governor — be it Murphy or a Republican opponent — can look forward to the jovial mood that prevails, even if it's fleeting before being overcome by more strident partisan political declarations.

Legislators — the ultimate decision-makers — once again will be importuned and cajoled in person by their constituents or by those who purport to represent their constituents.

The cloud will be lifted, the pandemic conquered but never forgotten, normalcy restored and the serious will again collide with the frivolous.

It may be disorderly, chaotic and bewildering, but it works. And it's fun.

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