

Some grit from Gov. Paterson - finally! Veto pen gets clueless pols' attention

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[Gov. Paterson](#) has finally figured out the key to success in [Albany](#): playing hardball.

Rational argument by itself will never persuade state lawmakers to do the right thing for taxpayers.

Nor will Paterson's personal charm, whining or hollow threats - all of which he has tried ad nauseam.

The only stimuli that this mulelike Legislature responds to are carrots and sticks.

And the state can't afford carrots right now.

So Paterson unleashed his most potent weapon - his veto pen, using it to kill what everyone assumed would be a routine two-year continuation of a retirement plan for police and firefighters.

That got their attention.

Benefits for existing uniformed personnel would be unchanged.

But as of July 1, if the veto stands, newly hired cops and firefighters will lose cherished rights, such as retiring in their 40s after 20 years on the job and counting overtime pay in calculating their pension payout.

The governor had been pushing for months to knock such excessively plush government pensions down to affordable size and gotten nowhere.

He warned the Legislature about soaring pension costs. They scoffed.

He threatened public employee unions with layoffs. They stonewalled.

Paterson's veto was the Albany equivalent of shock and awe. Within 24 hours, unions and lawmakers were suddenly ready to talk turkey on pension reform.

"Something's going to happen," [Staten Island Sen. Diane Savino](#) says she is warning her friends in labor. "You can either be part of it or have it done to you."

The word around the Capitol yesterday was that Paterson is on the verge cutting a deal with the unions on a trimmed-down pension plan for newly hired workers.

Reportedly, unions would support the plan, known as Tier 5, in return for Paterson's agreement to prune the state workforce with buyouts instead of layoffs.

If Paterson plays this right, he could finally snap his long losing streak and give himself a fighting chance in next year's election.

His success depends on two things.

First, Paterson must hang tough in final negotiations - which, given his normally fickle ways, may require a personality transplant.

If he gives away the stores with rich buyouts, or agrees to further water down his already very modest Tier 5 proposal, he will snatch defeat from the jaws of victory.

Second, Paterson can't pull this off alone.

Time and again, he has carried the banner of fiscal discipline into battle with Albany's powers that be, only to turn around and find that no one but a few think-tank idealists and column writers are marching behind him.

As his top adviser told business leaders at the [Citizens Budget Commission](#) yesterday, people who care about keeping taxes and spending under control need to take a page from the [Working Families Party](#) - get organized, get aggressive, get involved in political campaigns.

Otherwise, the WFP will eat their breakfast, lunch and dinner.

Still, Paterson has maneuvered himself to a position of strength - not with [Eliot Spitzer](#)-style breast-beating and spittle-spewing, but with firm, decisive, principled action.

He followed the advice of another [New York](#) governor, [Teddy Roosevelt](#), and let his big stick do the talking for him.

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