

Protesters fight planned closing of Hagedorn Psychiatric Hospital. Page 21

Christie, Sweeney refuse to budge

Deadlock develops on court nominee

By Chris Megerian and Matt Friedman
 STATEHOUSE BUREAU

Gov. Chris Christie expects Democrats to blink first as both political parties settle into a high-stakes game of political chicken over the future of the state Supreme Court.

Senate President Stephen Sweeney (D-Gloucester) is blocking Christie's nomination of attorney Anne Patterson to replace Justice John Wallace. Yesterday, the governor said he doesn't expect that to last.

"We'll work it out," Christie said. "I'm sure, over the course of time, Anne Patterson will be judged up or down on the merits of her nomination."

The governor nominated Patterson on Monday, and the debate quickly reached a stalemate with both Christie and Sweeney, state government's top two elected officials, refusing to budge. The governor chooses judges, but the Sen-

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Sen. Gerald Cardinale (R-Bergen)

ate president controls which nominations get confirmation hearings in the Legislature's upper house.

Although Wallace's seven-year term ends May 20, Sweeney wants to keep his seat on the state's highest court open for the next 22 months, when Wallace would have been eligible for mandatory retirement at age 70. Christie yesterday said the Senate is neglecting its constitutional responsibility.

"The Senate has the obligation for advice and consent," Christie said. "Not the option, the obligation."

Senate Republicans also denounced the move. "They're like children who didn't get the lollipop so they're going to stamp their feet in awhile," said Sen. Gerald Cardinale (R-Bergen), a longtime critic of the court. "In a couple of weeks things will calm down and we'll start being adults again."

Through a spokesman, Sweeney reiterated he "considers this case closed."

Former Chief Justice Deborah Poritz, in an NJN interview aired last night, criticized Christie, saying judicial term limits are there to remove judges who have proven unqualified.

"By doing this through the tenure process, I think the governor sends a different signal," she said. "The signal is be careful how you carry out your task

FBI informant details an alleged bribe

Defense says money given to former assemblyman was a consulting fee

By MaryAnn Spoto
 STAR-LEDGER STAFF

Opening arguments began yesterday in the federal corruption trial of former Assemblyman and Ocean Township Committeeman Daniel M. Van Pelt, with prosecutors accusing him of accepting a bribe, and defense attorneys contending the money was a legitimate consulting fee.

With Solomon Dwek, a failed real estate developer turned FBI informant, in the witness box in U.S. District Court in Trenton, attorneys jostled over

whether Van Pelt, 44, used his power for good or for greed.

In his 40 minutes answering questions from federal prosecutors, Dwek detailed his 17 years as a scam artist who offered bribes to politicians, allegedly including Van Pelt, to pave the way for development projects. Dwek posed as the fictitious developer David Esenbach, hoping to get quick approvals for development projects in Ocean Township in Ocean County.

"This defendant took \$10,000 in cash knowing full well it was being offered

in exchange for his official action and influence as a state assemblyman," Assistant U.S. Attorney Rachael Honig told a jury of nine women and seven men. "He tried to cover it up because he knew full well it was wrong."

But Van Pelt's attorneys insist the money was legitimate compensation, the first in what was to be Van Pelt's new career as a development consultant.

Van Pelt was one of 44 people arrested last summer in a federal sting involving political corruption and money

laundering. Van Pelt, a Republican, resigned a week from the Assembly and the township committee after he was arrested.

Dwek, the son of a prominent rabbi in Deal, is the government's main witness in the investigation that ensnared rabbis and public officials. Dwek began cooperating with the federal government in 2006 after he was charged with defrauding PNC Bank out of \$50 million.

In her opening arguments yesterday, Honig said Dwek met first met Van Pelt in 2008 "at the offices of the head of the

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A CENTURY WORTH MARKING



JERRY McCREA/THE STAR-LEDGER

Leonard Peck of Newton, who recently turned 100, stands outside the 1854 U.S. Post Office in historic Walpack Center. He worked for decades as a volunteer restoring old buildings in the Delaware Water Gap National Recreation Area.



Longtime volunteer at Water Gap celebrates some history of his own

By Joe Moszczynski
 STAR-LEDGER STAFF

Leonard Peck first climbed the craggy hills at the Delaware Water Gap 82 years ago, beginning his fascination — and sometimes obsession — with the park's sweeping views, rugged trails and storied past.

The former Sparta resident spent decades preserving the crumbling stone and wooded buildings tucked amid the sloping forests. He fought to correct the spelling of an island (from Shapnack to Shapanack) on maps of the Delaware

to Sparta. After 50 years of marriage, He still gets out, let me tell you," said Johnny Carawan, a ranger who coordinates volunteer programs at the park, a 70,000-acre swath straddling 40 miles of the Delaware River along the New Jersey-Pennsylvania border.

Peck was born in Camden County and grew up in Brooklyn. His father was treasurer at a local terminal company. He served in World War II, married, raised three daughters, became president of a meat-slicing machine company and retired.

In 1970, Peck moved to Sparta. After 50 years of marriage,

VIDEO: Watch The Star-Ledger video by Jerry McCreA, only at nj.com/videos.