

STATEHOUSE

With elections over, lawmakers face long to-do list in lame duck

Continues from A1

"Maybe I am a little bit more positive as a county chair, I guess, but I feel like (we) have a great mandate from yesterday that the governor can certainly rely on as he continues to push the agenda he's been pushing since he has been in office," Perez said a day after the election.

Lawmakers have their own priorities, however, and there is a long list of outside policy and advocacy groups that are pushing several issues that have long been stalled in the Legislature.

Here is a look at some of the key issues that could come up when the Legislature returns to Trenton later this month:

LIQUOR LICENSE REFORM

At the top of Murphy's agenda for the lame duck session is overhauling New Jersey's antiquated liquor license system, an issue the governor has been pushing lawmakers on since his State of the State address in January.

A coalition of New Jersey chefs and restaurateurs have for years fought to reform Prohibition-era policies that restrict the number of liquor licenses towns can issue based on population. Under the current system, liquor licenses are bought and sold in New Jersey for millions of dollars.

The system has effectively crippled some small independent restaurants that can't afford a license, and prevented others from getting into the business because it is harder to turn a profit without selling alcohol.

The restaurant lobby says lower liquor license fees and added competition would hurt those who paid for and currently hold liquor licenses, a narrative that for years has swayed policymakers.

When the governor unveiled his plan to overhaul the system earlier this year, state lawmakers immediately started breaking it down into smaller bills that made some improvements but fell short of comprehensive reform.

One of those bills (S3038) was a bipartisan measure that would repeal a long list of licensing conditions that supporters say has severely handicapped the state's craft brewery industry. The Legislature voted without any dissent to pass it.

Murphy in September reiterated his support for what the brewery bill aims to accomplish. But it doesn't go far enough,

the governor said, and he plans to send it back to the Legislature with amendments aimed at broader license reform in the Garden State.

New Jersey's breweries, wineries and distilleries are "all operating under ridiculous restrictions," Murphy said. "I agree with these folks, and we want to lift these restrictions."

"We also want ... broad, comprehensive Main Street liquor license reform, because we've got Prohibition liquor license in this state," Murphy said while stressing the state is not enforcing any of the brewery restrictions until Jan. 1.

State Senate President Nick Scutari, D-Union, told NJ Advance Media on Tuesday the goal of lame duck is to "continue to plot course methodically and steady." "Nothing dramatic," Scutari said.

CASINO SMOKING BAN

One bill on pace to finally get a vote is a long-stalled measure (S264) that would completely ban smoking in Atlantic City casinos. New Jersey banned smoking inside bars, restaurants, and other public places in 2006 but included a provision that would allow casinos to permit smoking on 25% of their floors.

A proposed law to end that exemption has been years in the making, and it appears finally ready to come up in lame duck after questions that it was held this year for political reasons.

A hearing on the measure in February featured emotional testimony from some of the more than 100 casino workers who packed a Statehouse chamber to voice concerns that secondhand smoke in gambling halls was hurting their health.

"I'm here today to beg that all of you would have mercy on us casino workers and pass the bill so that we can also ... work in a smoke-free workplace," said Beverly Perna-Quinn, a casino employee for 42 years and the local UAW union president.

On the other side of the issue, business leaders and some workers from Atlantic City's main casino union argued that installing such a ban now would drive away gamblers who want to smoke — especially to a casino just over the bridge in Philadelphia that still allows smoking.

They warned jobs and revenue would disappear and some casinos would close in an uncertain economy and as gambling halls continue to recover from the coronavirus pandemic — a similar argument to



Mary Iuvone, for The Star-Ledger

the casino industry's. (That's despite an independent report last summer disputing such an outcome.)

State lawmakers now seem poised to finally vote on and approve the measure during lame duck. Scutari told NJ Advance Media on Tuesday that a vote "looks likely in the Senate" at least.

The measure would also need to pass the Assembly. Murphy has indicated he would sign it if it gets to his desk.

Sen. Joseph Vitale, D-Middlesex, who has long pushed for this, celebrated the move and said: "It's a big deal for the people exposed to second-hand smoke."

BANNING BOOK BANS

There could be a fight during lame duck over a bill Democrats introduced this year that would prohibit schools and libraries in the state from enacting book bans, with those who don't follow risking financial penalties.

The legislation (S3907) aims to "prohibit" libraries and local school boards in the Garden State from "banning or restricting access to certain books" and other resources because of "partisan or doctrinal disapproval" by having them adopt policies opposing it.

The measure would authorize the state departments of Treasury or Education to

withhold state aid from those that don't comply.

Sen. Andrew Zwicker, D-Middlesex, a main sponsor, said in May that he introduced the measure as statistics show a national rise in efforts to restrict books. He said history has seen attempts to censor "ideas people don't agree with or are uncomfortable with" for as long as books have existed.

In an interview with NJ Advance Media last week, Zwicker said he doesn't have a commitment on the bill yet but he's been "working hard to get it done." He noted it was especially critical after Tuesday's elections.

In the final months leading up to the election, Republican candidates across the state zeroed in on parental involvement in education and framed it as a "parental rights" issue. Some political experts now say that was a mistake that likely benefited Democrats on Election Day.

"I think given the results we've seen, this is the right time," Zwicker said.

CHANGES TO OPEN PUBLIC RECORDS

Lame duck sessions also present lawmakers with an opportunity to advance unpopular, or even personally beneficial, legislation without having to worry about the potential blowback in an upcoming election.

One such bill that could come up is a measure to reform New Jersey's Open Public Records Act (OPRA), which has advocates on alert.

News reporters, attorneys and even local gadflies use access laws like OPRA to sift through contracts, permits, memos and a whole range of government secrets that officials might otherwise prefer to stay hidden.

Lawmakers say local governments are being swamped with frivolous and time-consuming requests, many from attorneys, and want to put a stop to it.

Transparency advocates, however, say a package of proposed laws introduced in June to overhaul OPRA would decimate government accountability efforts in New Jersey, a state that already walls off government records open to public inspection elsewhere.

The Center for Public Integrity gave New Jersey an "F" for public access to information in a 2015 report, noting the law largely exempts state lawmakers from **SEE STATEHOUSE, A7**

DUO TO HIGH DEMAND
WE ARE KEEPING OUR

German Menu

We are Open
Daily For Dine in and Take Out

Happy Thanksgiving

TO EVERYONE!

Appetizers

Coconut Shrimp	\$14.95
Clams Casino	\$14.95
Stuffed Clams	\$14.95
Pierogi	\$14.95
Mozzarella, Prosciutto, Tomato, Roast Peppers Salad	\$14.95

Entrees

Includes: Soup or Salad, Potatoes & Vegetable

Sliced Fillet Mignon w/ Port Wine Mushroom Sauce	\$29.95
Roast Vermont Turkey w/ Chestnut & Sausage Stuffing	\$24.95
Baked Virginia Ham w/ Fruit & Sauce	\$24.95
Roast Pork	\$24.95
Stuffed Wild Sole w/ Stuffed Crab Meat & Shrimp	\$24.95
Stuffed Chicken w/ Spinach, Mozzarella, Prosciutto	\$24.95

Dessert

Fresh Strawberry w/ Grand Marnier Whipped Crème
Apple or Pumpkin Pie
Complimentary Fresh Fruit

Children's Menu Available \$8.95

MEMPHIS BAR-B-Q

Memphis Bar-B-Q Sandwich \$12.95

Bar-B-Q Platter \$18.95

Bar-B-Q Chicken \$16.95

Bar-B-Q Sampler \$22.25

Bar-B-Q Ribs Regular \$22.95 Rib Killer \$29.95

Choose TRADITIONAL STYLE

Slow smoked for hours and basted with our secret Bar-B-Q sauce to keep them moist and juicy.

-OR-

MEMPHIS STYLE

Slow smoked for hours basted with a special marinade and then sprinkled with a mixture of rare dry seasonings.

TRIMMINGS

Bar-B-Q Beans \$3.95

Cole Slaw \$3.95

Onion Ring Loaf 1/2 loaf \$4.95, Full loaf \$5.95

SPONSOR CONTENT

Putting children first: Experts at Cipriano Law Offices can help divorcing/divorced partners co-parent their kids in a productive way

Divorce can be a painful and stress-inducing experience for all parties involved, especially for its most innocent victims — the children caught between squabbling and acrimonious parents.

Cipriano Law Offices is here to help.

"Sometimes people involved in a divorce use their children and don't realize it because they're angry and emotional," shared Melissa Cipriano, owner of West Caldwell-based Cipriano Law Offices, a family law advocacy practice which was founded in 2003 and which has an additional office in Florida. "I'm an experienced parenting coordinator who assists parents that can't get along by making recommendations, communicating with their children's schools, afterschool activity leaders, and health care professionals to ensure that their children are cared for, I also advise judges of material developments and issues involving their children," she said. "There can be chaos going on in a family when the parents are at odds and our involvement can help contain litigation and minimize unnecessary stress for kids."

"We advocate for our clients but always consider the child in a divorce — as a parent coordinator or a court appointed guardian ad litem, the child's interests come first," Cipriano explained. "Children don't necessarily have the maturity to understand different perspectives or why mom or dad is upset and can often internalize things and wonder what they did wrong to cause the situation," she said. "This can result in behavioral issues (such as eating disorders, acting out, etc.), embarrassment, resentment, and/or a strained relationship with one or both parents."

Cipriano states, "With 14 team members in the practice — including seven attorneys who specialize in family law, four of whom are court qualified mediators and two who serve as parenting coordinators — we understand the importance of protecting the children while aiding in the parents as they create a new family dynamic during and post-divorce. Our attorneys have taken divorce and custody battles through to trial when the parties cannot come to agreement, we understand the difficulties facing families as they move through the court system and to that end our team is known for our reasonable positions. We are well-respected by judges, and have a very good reputation in the community."

"Upon agreeing to represent a client as a parent coordinator, we make a proposal right away in terms of the way the parents should communicate and the rules they should agree to abide by getting all of the parties on the same page," Cipriano said of her team's process. "Resolving these issues up-front will make things better for the children and parents alike."

For her part, "I'm a child of divorce and also divorced myself, so I have extensive personal experience in this arena," noted Cipriano, who has two teenage children. "If done right, you can help

kids get through these family issues without damaging them and enable all family members to move on with their lives in a productive way. Our involvement as parent coordinators can help take the temperature down in heated situations and help avoid the negative emotions and resentment that accompany many divorces," she confirmed. "This will ultimately make things easier for children and reduce any negative impact on their relationships with others in the future."

Top Tips for Positive Co-Parenting

Following are several of Cipriano's top tips for productive co-parenting in cases of divorce:

- **Create a Co-Parenting Plan** -- "Anything parents can do to organize their thoughts and behaviors and establish clear expectations will result in a much calmer, smoother, and less chaotic experience for everyone," Cipriano said. Towards this end, she recommends developing a clear and comprehensive co-parenting plan that outlines roles, responsibilities, and schedules, and reviewing and updating this plan as necessary.
- **Promote Clear Communication** -- According to Cipriano, everyone will benefit when co-parents maintain open and honest communications regarding important decisions, schedules, and updates in their child's life. She also encourages them to use respectful and positive language about each other and the topics they're discussing to avoid negatively influencing their children.
- **Remain Flexible:** Cipriano recommends that co-parents be willing to adjust schedules and plans when unexpected situations arise. "When parents are rigid, children can miss out on events and begin to resent and/or be embarrassed by one or both parents," she said.
- **Consider Mediation:** "We do a lot of mediation at our firm and can get clients into mediation fairly quickly," Cipriano said. "For the sake of the family, it's significantly cheaper to pursue mediation than litigation and will set a more positive tone going forward, as studies show that opting for litigation often only continues the cycle of litigation, while those who opt to mediate and agree on a solution will continue to agree."
- **Focus on Your Child's Best Interests:** "If parents genuinely love their children and prioritize their children's needs, well-being, and mental health, they should give their kids a constant when it comes to co-parenting arrangements," Cipriano said. "Our world is unsafe enough today without giving children an unnecessary source of insecurity."

Specializing in family law advocacy since 2003, Cipriano Law Offices is located at 175 Fairfield Ave., Suite 4C/D in West Caldwell and can be reached at 973-403-8600 or by visiting www.ciprianolaw.com.

— Susan Bloom