Pension reform

The state pension system has been tough on taxpayers. Don’t get us wrong. We’re not condemning the entire system. We support the concept of workers paying into a trust that will provide an assured income and a degree of health benefits once they have retired. But the New Jersey pension system has been abused in so many ways that taxpayers must feel they are being taken advantage of by greedy insiders.

For years, politicians have made concessions when negotiating annual contracts for municipal and county employees, granting benefits that we now can not afford to pay. It kept taxes low back then, because the payouts would not come until after the workers had retired, and it made those politicians look good: I held down taxes, they’d say. But then the state decided to save more money by not making required annual payments into the system, which is now $54 billion underfunded, one of the worst government pension programs in the nation. Taxpayers made their payments to Trenton, but the funds were spent elsewhere. Are we going to ask taxpayers for that money again?

Politicians also are taking advantage of a misguided law that gives certain political leaders the ability to collect their pension while still working. That’s wrong. It’s legal, they say. Sure it is, but it shouldn’t be. It’s just another loophole written by insiders for insiders.

And now a former mayor of Irvington in Essex County, Michael Steele, who pleaded guilty to taking $120,000 in bribes for rigging bids for contractors while he served as business administrator for the town’s school district, is being forced to give up a portion of his pension. Only a portion? Steele had two pensions, having paid into the Public Employee Retirement System for about 12 years, and the Teacher Pension and Annuity Fund, to which he paid dues for about 16 years. At his plea, Steele wanted to forfeit four years of his Teacher Pension, the time period in which he took the bribes. The prosecutor wanted him to forfeit both pensions. We agree with the prosecutor.

But the judge sided with Steele. The prosecutor appealed, and on May 20 an appellate panel said Steele should forfeit his entire Teacher Pension, but could keep his other state Pension. That ruling is in agreement with the 2007 statute that regulates such cases. But we disagree with the statute. Steele should have had to forfeit both pensions. The punishment would be a warning to all others who are thinking of stealing from the taxpayers.

Stagnant issues and numbers

It didn’t get much notoriety, but it may be Linda Stender’s signature moment in her time in Trenton as a member of the State Assembly. She has been one of the leaders in the effort to reinstate $7.5 million for family planning in the state budget.

The funds sought would provide counseling and needed advice through clinics to the underprivileged for family planning services. The political decisions are the real rub. Pro Life groups have long contended their clinics serve as a vehicle to encourage advice on seeking an abortion.

The Democratic controlled Legislature included the money in the last state budget. In Trenton talk, it was “zapped out.” Translated, it means Gov. Chris Christie “blue-penned it out” or just took the dollars out of the budget. Later efforts via legislation to restore the money met with a veto by Christie. With sufficient support in the legislature by Republicans, the veto stood.

The real goal of the basic care includes blood pressure tests, diabetes screening, cancer screening, HIV testing and prenatal care. For a whole lot of poor people without health care, this is their sole avenue for help.

Speaking last week, Stender set forth her support for women’s issues like the right to choose. In terms of Christie’s actions, she used terms like “outrageous” and said the governor had “turned his back on women.” Stender, who has narrowly lost two runs for Congress, has a perspective on the national politics, and in the loss of $7.5 million, she sees the governor being able to court the right wing of the National Republican Party under the guise of fiscal responsibility in the state.

For Stender, the battle is problematic. Most of the people who will benefit won’t be able to vote for Stender. The battle is a losing one according to the legislator counting votes. The Republicans continue to have a veto-proof hand.

That is the very point. Without getting melodramatic it’s like Jimmy Stewart’s line in “Mr. Smith Goes to Washington” about losing causes being the only ones really worth fighting for. Fighting a foe using the smokescreen of fiscal need to hide a social agenda makes Stender’s effort that much more admirable.

Numbers getting older

We are starting to be a country of old folks. The median age in Union County jumped from 36.6 to 38 years old. Also, according to the official census numbers, the over 65 group has jumped from 12.6 percent to 13.5 percent. These numbers are serious. Through better health knowledge and medical care we are staying around longer. Experts predict that the baby boomers are already putting a strain on health care services, Interesting, our 38-year numbers in Union is still less then the state average of 39.

The bad news keeps on coming. People younger than 18 who are expected to pay my Social Security are down to 24.6 percent in the county and only 23.5 percent in the state.

Overall, in Union County we are holding our own population barely. We only rose 0.7 percent compared to a state rise of 3.17 percent. Last one out, close the lights.

An attorney, Frank Capece is a resident of Cranford.