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Paterson's efforts to repair image encounter skepticism

*By Joseph Spector
Journal Albany bureau*

ALBANY - In recent weeks, Gov. David Paterson proposed cutting mandates on local governments, capping state spending and overhauling the state's ethics panel.

He has sought a return to what made him popular among New Yorkers a year ago: He's talking tough about the state being fiscally austere, threatening to veto any new spending this year.

But for a Democratic governor whose popularity is at record lows, Paterson's stance has apparently garnered little traction with voters and legislative leaders as he tries to prove he is the party's best candidate for governor next year.

The governor's strategy, according to lawmakers and officials close to him, is to try to stake out positions - on property taxes, on cleaning up Albany - that will resonate with voters and boost his standing in the fall.

If it works, that could allow him to fend off calls he not seek election in 2010 and stifle talk that the party should instead tap Attorney General Andrew Cuomo, who is riding high in statewide polls, as its gubernatorial candidate.

Assemblyman Marc Molinaro, R-Red Hook, put out a statement the day Paterson proposed ethics reform, praising him for seeking measures Molinaro believes are long overdue. But Molinaro said he isn't convinced the governor will show resolve and push to get the reforms into law.

"You can't get it done without first getting the stakeholders at the table, second building consensus and third focusing on a strategy to get them adopted," Molinaro said.

"Simply throwing out an idea that will fail is probably worse than throwing out the idea to begin with - because you look hapless."

Many officials doubt Paterson can turn around voters' opinions; last week, several top staffers resigned. A Siena College poll Tuesday found his job performance rating at 18 percent, the lowest of any New York governor in modern times.

The problem, some officials said, is Paterson will have trouble preaching fiscal discipline when he signed off on a state budget in April that increases spending by 9 percent and raises \$8 billion in new taxes and fees.

Paterson and his aides argue the budget, when federal stimulus money is excluded, increases spending less than 1 percent. They said the governor made record budget cuts in his first year in office after succeeding Gov. Eliot Spitzer in March 2008.

Last fall, when he was warning of the state's fiscal crisis, Paterson's approval rating was in the mid-60s.

But the state's economy continued to worsen, producing a decline in revenues and heavy job losses in the private sector. Paterson's budget proposal last December, which included 137 new taxes and fees, and his poor handling of picking a U.S. Senate candidate in January, led his approval to plummet.

Recently Paterson has sought to get back to fiscal issues. He ordered agencies to evaluate state mandates pushed down to local governments that are often blamed for high property taxes. Then he proposed to cap state spending to the rate of inflation and vowed to reform the ethics panel.

Paterson knocked those who say he should "get tough" with the Legislature, saying it is best to try to work with them.

"What I am supposed to do, have them all arrested?" he said.
