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Corzine happy with attention on train

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WASHINGTON -- With most of the Republican gubernatorial field boycotting yesterday's ride to Washington, the annual Chamber of Commerce train trip became the Jon Corzine Express.

Amid a slumping economy and with controversy surrounding this year's event, the Democratic incumbent had a captive audience of lobbyists, business leaders and opinion makers on board the chartered Amtrak train that ambled from Newark to Washington.

Dubbed the "Walk to Washington" because many riders try to inch up and down the train's aisles, the trip had far fewer participants than previous years because of the slumping economy.

And GOP gubernatorial contenders Christopher Christie, Steve Lonegan and Rick Merkt refused to take the ride, calling it a symbol of the state's broken insider-heavy political culture. Lonegan dubbed it the "tax and spend express." GOP candidate Brian Levine planned to ride the train, but had to cancel due to last-minute obligations.

That didn't stop the train from serving its traditional role as the unofficial start to the gubernatorial campaign -- for Corzine, at least.

The governor, seeking a second four-year term, was surrounded by a gaggle of senior staffers and cabinet members as people crowded to shake his hand. He ardently defended the train and his presence on board.

"I think it would be a mistake for the governor of the state not to be here," Corzine said. "It's where people come together. I don't think anybody would claim that they were ever able to influence public policy because I rode this train the last three years."

Corzine, a Democrat with an uncommonly strong relationship with the Chamber, said the recession has echoes of the ride's origins.

"If you go back and look at the history of this, the first train trip was in 1937, the midst of the Depression -- at a time when we were trying to pull the country together at another economic stress point and move us forward," Corzine said. "And people thought it was a good idea to get business and labor and nonprofits and people like the **Junior League** all together and think about New Jersey's future in a positive manner and I think that's what we're doing here."

The boycott by the GOP contenders was the talk of the train. "What happens in politics is you look for an issue," said former Gov. Brendan Byrne, who has taken more than 50 trips. "This guy says one thing, so you do the other."

Byrne, a Democrat, equated it to a moment in the 1957 gubernatorial campaign when GOP nominee Malcolm Forbes criticized the AFL-CIO after the union backed incumbent Democrat Robert Meyner. Byrne recalled it backfired for Forbes.

"The AFL-CIO worked their (butts) off in the election" for Meyner, who won, he said.

Republican leaders on the train said they understood the protest. Sen. Kevin O'Toole, the Essex County Republican chairman, said candidates' "appearance is not mandatory. They're going to run their campaigns as they see fit, they're going to break the mold about everything you know about politics."

O'Toole, the head of the state's Republican chairmen caucus, drew a distinction between the gubernatorial candidates and officials like himself, who were on the train. "This is a great outreach," O'Toole said. "I'm not running for statewide office. If they choose to make their political decision, God bless them. I think people read too much into politics. Having this conversation is kind of preposterous."

Chamber officials, however, were angered by the boycott and the comments by the GOP candidates. The group's president, Joan Verplanck, said yesterday Christie's campaign added insult to injury on Wednesday when an official called to ask if they could distribute literature on board even as the candidate was publicizing his boycott.

"Imagine that. They kick the crap out of us and then they want to put stuff on the train," she said. "That's not the way it works."

Christie campaign manager Bill Stepien said "overeager" volunteers contacted the Chamber without clearing through the campaign headquarters. "Staffers are always looking for ways to get Chris' name and message out there," Stepien said. "This is something that Chris didn't want to be a part of."

Assembly Minority Leader Alex DeCroce (R-Morris) said the boycott was not a swipe at the Chamber or business leaders. "I don't think it's an insult, no way," said DeCroce. And, in an off-hand reference to Christie's size, DeCroce said "he's

probably doing the people a favor, in a way, because that train is going to be jammed up. You know how it is.”

Chamber officials said the recession routed rail attendance. Fewer than 1,000 took the ride, down 600 from most years. The primary sponsorship rights were sold to Sun National Bank for \$50,000, half what it went for last year.

The economy didn't dampen the spirit in Car 8, where Corzine hand his team held court. People mobbed the aisles to get a glimpse of the governor as he noshed on a turkey sandwich and Diet Pepsi.

“They've got to have him away from the bar car,” one woman grouched. “This is double trouble.”

Staff writer Susan K. Livio contributed to this report.