

# Hawkins boosts health, pension reforms

## *A trip to Trenton for bill ceremony*

By Chris Sykes  
Staff Writer

Mayor Eldridge Hawkins Jr. was in Trenton last week to witness Gov. Chris Christie sign the state's new employee pension and health care reform bills into law.

Although it might have seemed strange to some of the mayor's supporters and detractors in the city to see their Democratic leader down in the state capitol hailing a landmark historic legislative victory for a Republican governor, Hawkins said it was not as unusual as they believed it to be. He said there was no other place he would rather have been.

"I'm the chairman of the Management Reform Committee of the League of Municipalities. It's my job to work with the league and the state to lobby for positive changes in rules and laws that would allow us to better run municipal government," Hawkins said. "The legislation the governor signed into law was the culmination of the fight to ensure that the pension system would remain solvent and to help ensure that the employees will share the costs of the increase in their health benefits above the 1.5 percent that they were previously paying.

"This reform is something that's positive," he continued. "Through my position at the league, I was able to fight for change that was positive and fair to everyone involved."

The new pension and health benefits laws have drawn the ire of public sector employees who feel they violate their right to collective bargain by making changes legislatively that should have been done through negotiations.

Hawkins said he believed the new laws are good for everyone.



Photo Courtesy Office of the Governor

Mayor Eldridge Hawkins Jr., fifth from right, watches as Gov. Chris Christie signs legislation on pension and health benefit reforms for public employees.

He said the problem public employee unions do not want to acknowledge is that health care and pension benefits costs are the "highest drivers in local government budgets."

"The employees were paying 1.5 percent of their health benefits before the changes," Hawkins said. "In the 2 percent cap world, we have to comply with all these things. It becomes very difficult to

do with all these costs and expenses that we can't control.

"One of the things that the league opposed, and we were successful in getting it removed from the bill, was the demand that state employees only use state health care providers," Hawkins added.

Hawkins said the goals of the unions and government need not be adversarial. He said he wants to keep employees working so they

can deliver needed services, but those services cost money. Since the state has limited aid to municipalities, something had to give.

"If we can't find savings, then we have to lay people off," Hawkins said. "In order to operate in the worst economy since the Great Depression, we have little choice but to cut costs and expenses any way that we can. That means working in tandem with others."