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GOV. CHRISTIE IS CAUTIOUS ON IMMIGRATION POLICY

By Heather Haddon
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On a three-day swing through Mexico, whose porous border with the U.S. has triggered a widening political debate, Gov. Chris Christie said Thursday it wasn't his role to comment on immigration policy and he would articulate a full position only if he seeks the presidency in 2016.

"Until that time, it's not my job, and it's not my role," Mr. Christie told reporters Thursday before having lunch at a taco spot here. "I have no role in the immigration debate except for how it may affect the individual citizens of New Jersey, which I'll deal with as governor."

Other Republicans testing the waters for 2016 have taken explicit stances on the immigration question. Texas Gov. Rick Perry recently sent National Guard troops to the border with Mexico, and Florida Sen. Marco Rubio says he now favors additional border security measures before comprehensive changes to U.S. immigration policy are considered.

Mr. Christie wouldn't detail his thoughts on immigration Thursday when reporters asked about it repeatedly. He said he had been asked about immigration by some of the Mexican dignitaries and business officials he has met — not about his views but about how the issue plays out politically in the U.S. "It's a very difficult issue for both countries," Mr. Christie said.

"It's first and foremost the obligation of the president to try to get people together on this issue from his party and from the Republicans," he said. "Then it's also the obligation to the members of Congress to find a solution to something that obviously isn't working."

Immigration policy is likely to be a top issue for GOP primary voters in 2016, pollsters said.

"They want to see action," said Nicole McCleskey, a partner at the Republican Public Opinion Strategies polling firm, which has conducted focus groups this year on the topic of immigration.

Previous comments by Mr. Christie backing comprehensive changes to immigration policy placed him at the more moderate wing of the Republican Party, strategists said. That could appeal to the party's establishment and independents, but it would be a tougher sell to conservatives. "If you are where Christie is right now, navigating the primaries and caucuses is going to be tough for him," said Keith Appell, a consultant who represents conservative candidates.

At the same time, a Republican who can speak to GOP primary voters with more hard-line views on the issue may struggle to reach Democrats and minorities in a general election, said Gary Segura, a principal at the Latino Decisions polling firm and a Stanford University professor.

If Republican candidates "want to be president, my advice is to thread the needle. Sound tough but reasonable on immigration," Mr. Segura said.

Kevin Madden, a strategist who advised former Republican presidential nominee Mitt Romney, said no current 2016 hopeful has the lock on immigration within the GOP. Above all, a candidate needs to draw contrasts with the current administration on foreign policy, he said.

"The race is who can offer the strongest, most comprehensive critique of Obama and his national security and foreign policies failures and can offer the best way forward," he said.

So far while in Mexico, Mr. Christie met privately with President Enrique Peña Nieto for an hour, and has sat down with the Mexican secretaries of energy, finance and economy.

Mr. Christie said he invited Mr. Pena to visit New Jersey, and the Republican intends to return to Mexico.

On Thursday night, Mr. Christie was to tour the Basilica of Our Lady of Guadalupe, one of the most revered religious sites in Mexico. Mr. Christie, a Roman Catholic, said he was looking forward to bringing his eldest son, Andrew, who has accompanied him on the trip.

On the final day Friday, Mr. Christie was expected travel to Puebla, a state in Mexico where most Mexicans-Americans in New Jersey have roots.

Former U.S. Secretary of State Hillary Clinton was scheduled Friday to visit Mexico City for a philanthropic event held by billionaire Carlos Slim, but Mr. Christie and Mrs. Clinton wouldn't likely cross paths. "I wish Secretary Clinton all the best. I'm sure she'll have a great time here Friday," Mr. Christie said.