

Strickland sets goals for Ohio

by Paul E. Kostyu

COLUMBUS, Ohio - Gov. Ted Strickland promised a budget with the largest property tax cut in Ohio history, the lowest growth rate in 42 years, restrictions on vouchers and charter schools, and expanded health and senior citizen care.

Strickland told a joint session of the Ohio Legislature on Wednesday that he was making a start and asked for lawmakers' help.

It's unclear whether he'll get that from majority Republicans, who sometimes aggressively applauded and other times sat in stony silence.

For Democrats, the speech represented a chance to clap and holler as one of their own went down a litany of programs they support. Strickland was the first Democratic governor in 16 years to deliver a state of the state address.

Strickland said the state of the state was resilient and "full of promise" and the "people of our state are ready to reject the status quo."

"Ohio can thrive and Ohioans can thrive," he said, but they need the state's help.

He said his administration's primary goal is to keep and create jobs and make Ohio "a center of advanced energy technology."

Many of the details of Strickland's proposals are expected in his budget, a skeleton version of which is to be announced Thursday. A detailed budget is expected next week.

Republican leaders, Senate President Bill Harris, R-Ashland, and House Speaker Jon Husted, R-Kettering, repeatedly said at a press conference after the speech that they need to see the details before commenting on the substance of the governor's plan.

Husted said he agrees with Strickland's goals, but they may not agree on how to reach them.

"We have common ground," Harris said. "He did a very good job of addressing the issues for the state. We know there's work to be done."

Harris said he appreciated Strickland's recognition for "what we have done," particularly the update of the state's antiquated tax code two years ago.

Husted said he needs time to educate his caucus, particularly new members, about the proposals. "We need time to grow comfortable with them," he said.

Husted, the major supporter of charter schools and vouchers in the Legislature, said he had concerns about Strickland's proposal to end vouchers, stop for-profits from operating schools and end any new charter schools. Husted said he didn't want children sent back to failing public schools.

Strickland Thursday is undertaking a five-city tour to promote his plans across the state.

"There is belt tightening ahead and it's not a pleasant thing to do," Strickland told lawmakers. "We can continue divvying up our shrinking resources and spreading them around so that everybody is mildly satisfied while nothing is actually accomplished. Or we can make very tough choices."

Two of his 18 departments will absorb cuts, nine will make do with funding that doesn't keep up with inflation and seven will "receive reasonable budget increases," he said. In the first year of the budget general revenue spending will shrink and over the two-year budget, total spending will increase 2.2 percent annually, the lowest growth rate in 42 years.

"For those tempted to cave in to the special interests, who will come asking you to restore this item and that loophole, my message to you is this: It's time for shared sacrifice," he said.

Here are some of Strickland's proposals:

EDUCATION

- Exempt the first \$25,000 of a home's value from property taxes for people over 65 or disabled, regardless of income.

- Require school systems to adopt a fiscal reporting system to see where money goes and what is accomplished.

- Increase the basic state funding per student by 3 percent in each of the next two years.

- Increase the state's support of local schools districts to 54 percent by 2009.

- Increase poverty-based assistance by 22 percent over two years.

- Make a child in a family under 200 percent of the poverty level eligible for any early care and learning program.

- Provide \$10 million to expand public pre-school for 3- and 4-year-olds.

HIGHER EDUCATION

- In 10 years, increase the number of Ohioans with a college degree by 230,000 and the graduation rate by 20 percent.

- Establish a higher education compact between state and public colleges and universities. Funding for the basic instruction subsidy will increase by 5 percent next year and 2 percent the following year. In return, school must not increase tuition next year and cap the increase in the second year at 3 percent.

- Create a cabinet level chancellor of higher education.

ENERGY

- Coordinate an almost \$1 billion investment in energy programs.

- Target \$250 million per year in tax-exempt bonds for investment in energy projects.

HEALTH CARE

- Provide access to affordable health care coverage for everyone up to age 21.

- Offer State Children's Health Insurance Program to Ohio children whose parents make up to 300 percent of the federal poverty level (\$62,000 for a family of four).

- Provide families that exceed the limit an opportunity to buy into Medicaid coverage for children.

- Expand Medicaid eligibility for working parents up to 100 percent of poverty and coverage of pregnant women up to 200 percent of poverty.

SENIOR CARE

- Expand a state program to provide in-home services to vulnerable older Ohioans who do not require nursing home care.

- Cut the time for taking care of paper work.

ECONOMY

- Eliminate the discount on the state sales tax provided to large retailers.

- Develop a grant program to encourage job training and creation for young people in low-income communities. Participating employers get funds to support training and wages.

- Review state regulations and eliminate obsolete rules.

- Evaluate every state department by its ability to keep, attract and create jobs.

- Apply the Commercial Activity Tax to the oil industry.

- Apply the full sales tax to residents of other states who buy vehicles in Ohio.

- Prevent shipment of untaxed cigarettes into Ohio.

WHAT PEOPLE HAD TO SAY

Here's what people said about Gov. Ted Strickland's state of the state speech:

"It is very bold of Gov. Strickland to eliminate vouchers and halt the expansion of Ohio's failed charter schools."

- Sue Taylor, president, Ohio Federation of Teachers

"Ted Strickland gave Ohioans the same platitudes he dished out on the campaign trail. ... This was the definition of a liberal agenda: If you need it, the government will give to you, and we'll worry about how to pay for it later."

- Bob Bennett, chairman, Ohio Republican Party

"(We) are pleased that Gov. Strickland has proposed raising the Medicaid income eligibility ceiling for parents to 100 percent of the federal poverty level. Approximately 25,000 families are estimated to be affected by this change."

- Kathleen Gmeiner, spokesperson, Universal Health Care Action Network of Ohio

The governor recognized "the common-sense value of investing in home care services, both for the Ohioans who want them and for the state's bottom line. ... (It will) not only to save critical Medicaid dollars, but also to give Ohio's seniors the opportunity to retain independence."

- Kathleen Anderson, executive director, Ohio Council for Home Care

"As our population ages and our need for a robust continuum of care increases, it is important that we adequately fund and support home care, assisted living and skilled nursing facilities."

- Alan Melamed, spokesman, Skilled Nursing Care Coalition

"The governor's plans for the estimated \$5 billion lump sum payment (from the tobacco master settlement agreement) include keeping commitments for school facilities funding and eliminating the need to issue bonds."

- Mike Renner, executive director, Ohio Tobacco Prevention Foundation

"Finally, Ohio has a governor who gets the connection between an enlightened energy policy, a sound economy and a protected environment."

- Jack Shaner, spokesman, Ohio Environmental Council

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