

Jan. 10, 2007

Opening-day address by Senate Minority Leader Andy McElhany to 66th General Assembly:

Congratulations to Senator Fitz-Gerald upon being re-elected Senate president, and welcome to the new members across the aisle. Although I wasn't crazy about the outcome of their races, I do respect the effort they put into them.

Of course, the same goes for our new governor. We look forward to working with him and will be seeking his support on some key policy decisions he may have to make.

Republicans are going to present the 66th General Assembly with an agenda of our own. We aren't just about digging in our heels. We want to move the ball forward. And we want to take this opportunity to invite members across the aisle - and our new governor - to help us advance policies we all should be able to embrace in a spirit of bipartisanship and can-do cooperation.

In the past election year, we all learned a lot about what issues are most on voters' minds. Time and again, we heard that people are concerned about gridlock on our highways; the availability and affordability of health care coverage; the quality of our public schools, and job creation. Those themes are familiar to both parties by now, but we Republicans have a distinct vision for addressing them. It is a vision that, regardless of the particular policy issue, gives taxpayers the most value for the least tax dollars:

- We all know there is a backlog of highway projects that has left huge gaps in Colorado's transportation network. We also all agree there must be a sustainable funding source to chip away at that backlog over the long run. Members, that funding source already exists. There is no need to raise taxes. The money is in fact pouring into state coffers as we speak, all the more so now that voters have suspended constitutional spending limits for five years. All we have to do is honor current law - Senate Bill 1 and House Bill 1310 - when we spend that money. The law says tax revenue that is collected in excess of the 6 percent by which our General Fund is allowed to grow each year must go first to transportation.
 - We just have to stop diverting money out of the General Fund to pet projects, which lowers the amount available for our highways.
 - We also have to accept that 6 percent annual General Fund growth is very generous. According to projections last month by Legislative Council, in five years, we'll actually be spending over one-third more than we do now. If that isn't enough, just how much is? We must resist calls to change the law - and attempts to dodge it - in a way that grows government programs at the expense of paving roads.
 - That is why I will introduce a measure this session asking voters in 2008 to place SB1 and HB 1310 into our state constitution, guaranteeing that it will remain a dedicated funding mechanism for highways for years to come. House Minority Leader Mike May is joining me in this effort. If we don't take this crucial step, we risk losing the confidence of the public as well as our business community, which depends on our transportation grid to drive our economy.

- The worries about health care coverage in many Colorado households are very real. It is somewhat troubling that we are going to wait at least a year before the legislature's "208 Commission" comes up with some answers. We want to begin chipping away at the problem sooner. We also want to ensure the commission's eventual recommendations don't wind up undermining the first-rate coverage and care many Coloradans already enjoy. In other words, let's not impose costly and restrictive solutions that already have failed in some other states. Here are a couple of things we can do right now:
 - House Minority Leader May will introduce a bill in the lower chamber to connect Coloradans who need coverage with the best health care options. I will carry the measure in the Senate. It will match those who need coverage with the most affordable private plans that are available as well as any state health care benefits for which they might qualify.
 - Before we consider any expansion of our state's budget-straining Medicaid program, it is important we find out just how accountable the program is over the money it already spends. Senator Shawn Mitchell will introduce a bill for a top-to-bottom, annual Medicaid audit arguably, the most comprehensive ever.

- As for Colorado's public schools, they are a mixed bag at best. There are some exemplary districts and schools out there and many, many outstanding and dedicated teachers. However, there also are abysmal graduation rates and test scores at plenty of schools, especially those serving low-income kids. Our schools need help, and they cannot wait for a landmark education overhaul. We would be waiting a long time. Here are some simple things we can do this year to empower our best and brightest teachers and to give a leg up to more of our children:
 - Senator Nancy Spence, a veteran of education reform and school choice, will introduce a proposal to establish Florida's STAR program for performance pay in Colorado. We will provide the incentive to more school districts to do as some innovative districts already have make sure good teachers get good pay. This will see to it that the teachers who really make a difference are rewarded and retained.
 - Senator Spence also will carry a bill establishing a unique teacher identifier to track the progress of teachers and link them to specific students over time.
 - It's about time we had a comprehensive, statewide standard for the courses a student must take before he or she can get a high school diploma in Colorado. Our kids deserve it, and the job market virtually requires it. Senator Josh Penry will carry a bill setting such a standard.
 - We also will be championing an effort to give cash-strapped parents and teachers a tax credit for school supplies they purchase for their children from dictionaries to computers.

- There is also considerable concern around Colorado about the ability of our economy to add jobs. Even in good times, job creation can dodge some sectors of our state's economy and vast expanses of our state's geography.
 - Senator Ken Kester, who was a businessman for decades in the Lower Arkansas Valley, understands that challenge about as well as anyone in here. He is carrying a bill with Representative Ray Rose in the House to offer employers a tax credit each time they add a new job to payroll.

- Underscoring our commitment to making it easier for employers to create jobs, Senator Scott Renfroe is introducing a bill that will lighten the load of small businesses by reducing paperwork they have to file with the state. Everyone knows small businesses need relief; it's about time we did something to lighten their load.

That's our core agenda: highways, health care, schools and jobs, and let me be the first to point out that we do not regard it as a cure-all. It is intended to get the ball rolling to set the pace on policy issues that are important to the people who sent us all here.

There are some things we hope NOT to see emerge from the General Assembly this session, and they are things we will vigorously oppose:

- One thing we will oppose will be any attempts to gut the gift ban voters just approved. Amendment 41 is poor public policy. However, our hands are tied now that voters have inserted the measure into the constitution. Any change that we seek, no matter how much we may feel it is warranted, must be referred to voters if it in any way can be read to narrow Amendment 41's focus.
 - If the voters didn't trust us enough to let lobbyists buy us a sandwich in the Capitol basement, imagine how they would feel about a legislative rollback of their handiwork.
 - One thing we can do through enacting legislation is to make sure this measure is fairly applied. Let's close the loopholes that the measure provides for other government bodies to lobby the General Assembly.
- Republicans pride themselves on an understanding of who really creates jobs and drives our prosperity - business. In the past two sessions, Gov. Bill Owens vetoed nearly 100 bills, many of which were measures passed by this body that could have undermined the business climate in Colorado.
 - Our new governor has gone on record saying he would have vetoed at least some of those same bills. Good. Here is our offer: Governor Ritter, we stand ready to sustain your veto of any job-killing, bad-for-business bills that make it out of the General Assembly.
 - The same goes for promised legislation that would undermine hard-won education reforms, like accountability measures that keep parents informed about the state of their neighborhood schools. Governor Ritter, we will sustain your veto of any bills that roll back education reform.
 - We also have been hearing from some who insist the curbs we passed on illegal immigration last summer are being too zealously enforced. As if that were the problem with illegal immigration. Governor, we also stand ready to sustain your veto of any attempts to roll back those reforms. We must continue to fight illegal immigration even when it's not an election year.

A couple of points in closing:

- We have just emerged from one of the biggest-spending and dirtiest campaign seasons in memory. Amendment 27, passed four years ago, was supposed to prevent that. It had the opposite effect, diverting big money into unaccountable independent groups that could sling mud and raise cash with impunity.

- It is time we found a way to hold politicians accountable for the money raised on their behalf. Let's join Senator Penry and Representative Rob Witwer in calling on legislative leadership to establish a Special Select Committee during the 66th General Assembly to develop reforms to Colorado's broken system of campaign finance in an open, comprehensive and bipartisan manner.

- Finally, the war in Iraq continues to be the cause of much debate, but on one thing we can agree, the need to honor Coloradans who have died fighting the war on terror. Sen. Mike Kopp will be carrying a bill this session to establish a memorial for the men and women in uniform who have lost their lives for freedom. I am hoping we all can come together on behalf of this nonpartisan, nonpolitical endeavor. Mike Kopp ought to know; he is a Gulf War veteran.

Thank you.