

01.15.09 - 2009 State of the Commonwealth Address

Governor Deval L. Patrick
2009 State of the Commonwealth Address
January 15, 2009
As Delivered

On Thursday, January 15, 2009, Governor Deval Patrick delivered his 2009 State of the Commonwealth address. The governor thanked his Legislative partners for enacting so much of his ambitious agenda last session, and acknowledged the challenges of the nationwide recession -- its impact on Massachusetts families and businesses and the tough budget cuts we made and will continue to make. While it may slow down our timeline, though, Governor Patrick promised that it will not stop our agenda for change, nor diminish our faith in each other.

Governor Deval Patrick:

Madame President, Mr. Speaker, and Members of the House and Senate,
Honorable Members of the Judiciary,
Lieutenant Governor and Fellow Constitutional Officers,
Members of the Cabinet, Reverend Clergy, Mayors and Other Distinguished guests,
And above all, the People of Massachusetts.

I want to first acknowledge my First Lady and yours, Diane Patrick. And Diane and I want to, together with all of you, acknowledge and thank the men and women in uniform - and their families - for the service they render in the United States military.

AN AGENDA FOR CHANGE

When we met in this chamber a year ago, I asked you to work with me on an ambitious agenda for change.

I asked you to increase support for public education, with a special emphasis on early education, all-day kindergarten and longer learning time - and you did.

I asked you to enact a Life Sciences Bill and a Clean Energy package -- to grow jobs and shape a new economic and environmental future -- and you did.

I asked you to support initiatives to end homelessness and move people from shelter to permanent housing -- as an act of both compassion and common sense -- and you did.

And I asked you to invest significantly over the next few years in rebuilding our college campuses, expanding broadband access, improving public and affordable housing, upgrading our parks and open spaces, and restoring our roads, rails and bridges - and you did.

In one of the most productive legislative sessions in a generation, you answered that call for action -- and the Commonwealth is stronger. So, Mr. Speaker, Madam President, and each and every Member of both bodies, let me first say thank you -- on behalf of all of the people of the Commonwealth.

OUR BUSINESS IS FAR FROM FINISHED

And yet our business is far from finished.

We gather tonight under an economic cloud darker than anything this Nation has faced in three generations. Tens of thousands of people in Massachusetts have lost their jobs to a nationwide recession. Thousands have seen their savings or home equity snatched away by turmoil in the markets. Banks have money but won't lend it. Businesses and nonprofits are laying off or won't hire because they can't see a clear path to tomorrow. We have unfinished business.

Within the sound of my voice tonight, there are mothers trying to choose between paying the rent or the heat this month, because they can't pay both. There are parents listening to me now who have had to tell sons and daughters, home from college for the holidays, that they can't afford to send them back next semester. There are homeowners on the brink of losing their homes because they got in too deep with the wrong lender. Achievement gaps in the schools persist in poor communities. And, in what feels like a personal tragedy for me, Black men, whether desperate or careless, are killing other Black men at ever more alarming rates. We have unfinished business.

BROKE, NOT POOR

So, this is not the time to let up or give up. This is not the time to either lose our will or our way -- the grim economic forecasts notwithstanding.

When I was growing up, we were forbidden from calling ourselves "poor." My grandmother taught us to say we were broke, because "broke," she said, is temporary. See, we will cycle out of this downturn eventually and start to expand opportunity again, to widen the reach of the American Dream. And I am confident that if we are honest about the challenges we face, responsible in the choices we make, and committed to work together for the common good, we will see our way through today's economic clouds to a stronger and brighter tomorrow.

At the federal level, we are working hard to help shape a federal stimulus package to bridge us to a better economy. If and when that package is passed, we will be ready to get projects underway and put people to work. That means jobs extending broadband services; jobs installing solar panels, wind turbines, and weather stripping; jobs rebuilding roads, rails and bridges; jobs modernizing our health care records management system and building schools.

Of course, our job in state government demands more than waiting for a federal lifeline. We have launched one billion dollars of capital projects to start over the first 6 months of this year, creating new jobs and making it more attractive for companies and families to put down stakes in Massachusetts. Thanks to successful implementation of health care reform, nearly 98 percent of all Massachusetts citizens now have health insurance that they can depend on, the highest proportion in the Nation. Our teachers and students continue to reach for ever better performance, scoring first in the Nation on NAEPs, the Nation's "report card," and near the top in the world on TIMSS, the international standards for math and science. We are not standing still.

NATIONAL ECONOMY AND BUDGET CUTS

Meanwhile, the economy is making much of what we need to do harder to do. In October, we identified and closed a \$1.4 billion gap in our state budget. With the economy continuing to deteriorate, we foresee the need for another \$1.1 billion in cuts and other budget solves this month. At the end of this month, I will file an Emergency Recovery Plan to close this further gap. My request to you is simple: Give us the tools and we will finish the job.

I will also file a balanced budget proposal later this month for the coming fiscal year. Given the decline in state revenue, spending must be at levels significantly below what they have been in better times. No one's priorities will be spared. Local services will be cut, and in many cases, police, firefighters and teachers will face layoffs. But as we debate these proposals among ourselves and with the advocates, let us remember that we are doing no more in state government than the people of the Commonwealth are having to do in their own lives -- to make do with less, to trim down wherever we can to get through to a better time.

I know the impact is real. I see the people with disabilities whose work opportunities have changed. I see the youth workers whose efforts at violence reduction are more limited. I see the college and university instructors, the home health aides, the child care providers and so many others who deliver vital services, but who work without a contract or adequate pay.

Some, I know, think that cutting government is always good. But they see only abstractions. Behind every one of those budget line items, I see somebody's best chance or only chance. And I will do my best to make the decisions I have to make with the impact of them clearly in mind.

We need everyone to contribute. We cut nearly \$800 million from the Executive Branch last October, and will make another round of deep cuts as part of our Emergency Recovery Plan. In my own office, we cut expenses by 17% in this year's budget, and will make additional cuts in the next fiscal year. Given the times, as you consider your own spending ideas, I am asking the Legislature and my fellow constitutional officers to do no less.

A SEASON OF SIGNIFICANT REFORM

At the same time, this crisis also presents us with opportunities. The times demand that we confront some issues that we have avoided in ordinary times. Seizing these opportunities will make us stronger in the long run. So, I am asking the Legislature tonight to join me in a season of significant government reform.

First, while we may not be able to fund local aid at current levels, we can provide tools to help local governments better manage through these difficult times. In that spirit, we will again propose a series of measures that give cities and towns greater authority over local decisions. That includes raising new revenue through a modest meals and lodging tax, eliminating the outdated exemption the phone company enjoys from paying the same local property taxes everyone else has to pay, and encouraging as much regionalization of local services as practical. If we cannot provide direct aid, let's at least untie the hands of local communities to capture the savings and raise the revenue within their reach. Let's enact a municipal reform package this spring.

Our transportation system - and the means by which we pay for it - is a cluster of tangled knots. It's time to level with ourselves and with the public about what our obligations are and how best to meet them, and to set us on a course to a more efficient and effective future. Let's radically simplify our transportation system, and set it on a sustainable path, by enacting meaningful transportation reform.

The pension system is an area where the abuses of a few cast a shadow on the worthiness of the whole. I support the defined benefit system that we have in place today in state government, as part of the bargain we have with workers to serve the public at frequently below-market compensation. But the rules must be tightened so that abuses are eliminated and special benefits for a select few are removed. Only then can we restore the public's confidence in the system. So, let's enact meaningful pension reform this session.

Public safety cries out for a better approach. Sentencing in the Commonwealth has become about warehousing people; and we do little to prepare the 94 percent of those incarcerated who will one day re-enter civic life. Once released, the misuse of the CORI system makes it nearly impossible for some people to get work, a place to live, and back on their feet. These practices may make a good sound bite, but they do nothing to make our communities safer. Let's focus less on old rhetoric and more on preventing crime, and pass a meaningful, comprehensive Anti-Crime Bill.

And let's enact ethics and lobbying reform now. I know we can't legislate morality. But we can close loopholes in the current rules and stiffen the penalties for breaking them. In the coming three weeks, take up and pass our ethics reform bill, and let's help restore the public's confidence in the basic integrity of state government.

These five reforms will make our communities stronger and our government better. Along with earlier measures to lower auto insurance rates, introduce civilian flaggers at construction sites, and create an independent Office of the Child Advocate, these reforms further a vision of state government that serves the public's interests, not the special interests.

SHORTCOMINGS

Now, none of us here has the gift of divine perfection - I know that. Sometimes, without a doubt, we will come up short. We have not yet, for example, been able to deliver on our commitment to reduce property taxes in every community. Our initiatives to propel public education into the 21st century may be implemented more slowly than I had hoped. Our proposal for resort casinos went down last year to defeat.

But in the words of Dr. Benjamin Mays, the legendary president of Morehouse College, "Not failure, but low aim, is sin." Some will prefer to do as little as possible, to hunker down to wait for better times. Others urge a more cautious agenda for fear that defeat provides a political advantage to our rivals. I choose a different path. I choose to focus on what's

next, what else we can do to help the people of the Commonwealth make a better way for themselves, their families and their communities. Hunkering down may be good advice in a hurricane, but it is not leadership. I choose a politics less about tactics and more about a vision for how to help ordinary people achieve their potential - even when times are tough.

"WE" MEANS ALL OF US

We do indeed have unfinished business. But the "we" to which I refer is not government alone. It's all of us. The times we are in are tough, but temporary. (Remember: "broke, not poor.") While they last, we are going to have to learn to lean on each other, to live as members of a community.

That means check in on your elderly neighbor when it's cold to make sure the heat is on. If you have some extra food, or can afford a few extra items at the grocery store, drop something off at the local food pantry. Take the coat your kids have outgrown over to a family shelter for a child it might fit there just fine. Recycle everything you can. Give your time, your energy, your heart to someone somewhere. And above all, for the adults, show a young person how to look up rather than down.

Maybe you will say that no governor should come to this podium on this occasion and ask you simply to care about what havoc this economy is wreaking in the lives of somebody else. But that is exactly what I am asking you do to. Because without you in this Commonwealth caring about that -- about each other -- nothing we do here matters.

TOGETHER WE CAN

See, I still have hope for the future of the Commonwealth and her people. I still believe that "together we can." And that is because I have always believed that "together we can" is more than a political slogan. It is an expression of will, of stubborn determination, of confidence. "Together we can" -- like "yes we can" -- is an assertion of character.

It's the same character that propelled a ragtag bunch of ill-equipped farmers and tradesmen, on a field in Concord and the green in Lexington, to invent America. It's the same character that caused slaves to steal away to freedom on the Underground Railroad, and lay claim to the conscience of a Nation. It's the same character that brought waves of immigrants to our shores with little or nothing, and enabled them in an earlier time and still today to build families, businesses and strong communities. It's the same character that inspires our researchers to build the web, or life-saving robots, or find a cure for humankind's most stubborn diseases; the same character that moves young parents to work two and three jobs so their children can one day work at one good one; and the same character that leads us to affirm, whether gay or straight, that in Massachusetts equal means equal.

My friends, "Together we can" is about who we are. We are a home for hope. Citizens of Massachusetts, as long as we remember that and act accordingly, the State of our Commonwealth will remain strong. And I will remain both proud and grateful to be your governor.

Thank you all. And God bless you all.