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NEWS RELEASE

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Governor Delivers Annual Message, Announces Insurance Deadline, Voter Approval of Tax Increases, Education and Civil Service Reforms and Continued Anti-Crime Measures

Gov. Christie Whitman today delivered her fourth Annual Message to a joint session of the Legislature and announced an agreement for completion of legislative action to reform auto insurance by March 30, 1998. She called for legislation that would allow local property tax payers to vote on any increases in property tax rates that exceed the level of inflation and for several changes in public education, civil service reform and tough anti-crime measures.

"We have to make New Jersey more affordable. We have to make New Jersey's schools -- every single one of them -- the best that they can possibly be. And, we have to make sure that every home, every street, and every neighborhood in New Jersey is safe for the law-abiding people of our state," the Governor said.

Gov. Whitman thanked legislators for joining with her to help bring the state so far in the past four years. Since 1994, the state has added 225,000 jobs, preserved a record amount of open space and has witnessed a drop in crime to its lowest level in 23 years. Welfare rolls have been cut by a third, New Jersey students are now subjected to rigorous academic standards and New Jersey's urban centers are witnessing a substantial rebirth.

"Well begun is half done," the Governor said. "But there is more to do to make New Jersey an even better place to live, work and raise a family."

"Let's begin by reducing the cost of auto insurance and easing the burden of property taxes for the people of our state. I promised during the recent campaign that I would vigorously address these issues in a new term and that's exactly what I intend to do," she said.

The Governor called for legislative enactment of real reforms to the state's 25-year old system of auto insurance and announced an agreement with legislative leaders to enact such reforms by March 30, 1998.

"We're going after real reform. Real reform will guarantee real savings. With real reform, every good driver will be able to afford car insurance. Real reform will minimize cost shifts to health insurance, and it will do this all without encouraging additional law suits," she said.

The Governor noted that her administration and the Legislature have worked together to enact changes that have helped municipalities to hold property tax increases to a 20-year low.

"But we are not done. There's more we can do to help get property taxes under control," she said.

"To begin with, it's about time to give local voters a voice -- a real voice -- in the property tax rates they pay. If a municipality wants to raise the property tax rate above the rate of inflation, the people should have a say. That's why I propose making those increases subject to voter approval on election day," Gov. Whitman said.

In addition to placing property tax increases before the voters, the Governor called for moving school board elections to November and for placing a question on school regionalization on the ballot, as well.

"I want to put an end to the anti-democratic way we present candidates for school boards to the voters for election. The current system actually seems designed to discourage broad public participation," she said.

"That's just not right. We live in a democracy and democracy only works if people participate. That is why I propose we move school board elections to November," the Governor said.

Combining school board elections with the general election will save taxpayer dollars and would dramatically increase voter participation. Nearly three times as many voters participate in the November election than in the current April school board elections.

On the subject of regionalized schools, the Governor noted that the Regionalization Advisory Panel, established under the state's education funding plan, is expected to recommend substantial consolidation of school districts. The panel could recommend placing the state on a course that would lead to the forced regionalization of some school districts.

"Our schools are so important. Their future should not be dealt with in a quiet little report. Any conversation about change should be soundly debated, fully in the public eye and with full public participation," she said.

"That's why I propose we bring this debate to the ballot for the voters' direct discussion," she said.

The Governor called upon the State Board of Education to put into place the rules and regulations to implement her public school choice program. She called for increasing the minimum number of classroom hours required in New Jersey schools and called for reforming, and possibly eliminating, principal tenure.

"I believe it's time we match the enormous responsibility of a principal's job with greater accountability. Let's work together to reform principal tenure to create a system that guarantees fairness but expects results," Gov. Whitman said.

The Governor closed her State of the State Address on the topic of crime. She noted that with the Legislature she has enacted tough new laws to keep violent criminals behind bars. Among the laws cited were Megan's Law, "Three Strikes and You're In," and statutes prohibiting early release for the most dangerous criminals.

"Clearly, these measures are making our communities safer and our families more secure. In 1996, crime dropped to its lowest level in 23 years and if we keep up our good work, crime will continue to decline," the Governor said.

The Governor called for enhanced penalties for those possessing firearms while also possessing illegal drugs.

"What could be more scary than the thought of somebody high on drugs waving a gun around," she asked. "How many more innocent victims have to be caught in the crossfire between drug dealers?"

She called for the civil commitment of still dangerous sex offenders, even after they've served their criminal sentence.

"Under Megan's Law, we've already kept more than 80 such predators in civil commitment beyond their initial prison terms. We should expand that authority," she said.

The Governor also called for significant changes to the state and local civil service systems. She called for changing the state pay system so that pay raises and advancements would be based on merit over seniority. She called for new legislation to allow municipalities to limit compensation for unused sick time and allowing municipalities to opt out of the civil service system altogether.

"These steps will help reduce current costs and help keep them under control at the local level. I committed to giving local officials all the tools they need to control local taxes. If they're as serious about controlling property taxes as I am, they'll use them," she said.

[Attached is a copy of the Governor's Annual Message.](#)

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