

Office of the Governor

PO BOX 004
TRENTON, NJ 08625

NEWS RELEASE

CONTACT: Pete McDonough
Jayne O'Connor
609-777-2600

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Governor Whitman Delivers Annual Message, Proposes \$1 Billion School Tax Rebate

Gov. Christie Whitman today reported to the state Legislature that the state of the state is "vibrant and vigorous" and laid out her agenda for the coming year - highlighted by a \$1 billion property tax rebate program for New Jersey homeowners.

"Today, I am proud to propose the single most significant property tax relief that New Jersey has ever provided: one billion dollars in direct relief that will go straight from the State House to your house," the Governor told the joint session of the Legislature during her annual State of the State address.

Under the Governor's proposal, the average homeowner would receive \$600 every year - or a 33 percent discount off the average school tax bill. School taxes make up the greatest portion of every property tax bill in New Jersey. The rebate will be equal to the school taxes each homeowner pays on the first \$45,000 dollars of assessed value on their home. The plan will be phased in over five years.

"This billion-dollar tax relief plan will require fiscal discipline from those of us in Trenton. Fiscal discipline means being very cautious about any new spending programs. Fiscal discipline means being very cautious about any new spending programs. Fiscal discipline means constantly reminding ourselves that the number one priority is helping you, the taxpayer," Governor Whitman said. "The fiscal discipline we show today will deliver a check to you tomorrow."

Gov. Whitman also offered property tax relief to New Jerseyans by voicing her support for Senate President Don DiFrancesco's plan to tie the state's municipal aid to the rate of inflation. The Senate President's plan insists that the additional aid be used for tax relief, rather than extra spending.

Gov. Whitman thanked the Legislature for working with her to make New Jersey a better state. "Let the fullness of our record mark my tenure as governor - and let that record be the health of our economy, the prosperity of our workforce, and the strength of our families," Gov. Whitman said.

The Governor also today released "New Jersey Leading the Way," a report that outlines dozens of state programs that have been cited as national models. From the first-in-the-nation Rehabilitation Subcode for older buildings to the nationally-recognized HMO Report Card, New Jersey is truly "leading the way," the Governor said.

Open Space

The Governor said part of the legacy that will be left to future generations is open space, thanks to the voters' approval of Gov. Whitman's plan to preserve 1 million acres of open space and farmland over the next decade.

To further that goal, the Governor proposed in her address a cash incentive for land owners who donate open space or farmland to the state. "If you do your part to keep New Jersey green, you ought to be able to keep a little more green in your wallet," Gov. Whitman said.

The Governor said donations of land will leave extra money for developing and maintaining parks. She said she would dedicate \$100 million over ten years for park development, and increase funding to the state parks to hire 100 more park rangers and maintenance workers.

She added that the state's commitment to open space should be more visible and she unveiled signs that will be posted throughout New Jersey showing the state's progress. She also unveiled a registry to keep track of the million acres as they are preserved.

"I want to make our commitment even more visible. I want everyone in this state to share in our journey toward 1 million acres. And I want others who visit New Jersey to watch us reach our goal," the Governor said.

Education

Gov. Whitman also proposed improving education for our young people by imposing tougher standards for teachers.

"Right now, we require graduates from New Jersey colleges to carry a C+ average to qualify as a candidate for certification. Well, C+ isn't good enough," the Governor said. "So I am asking the State Board of Education to require all new graduates who apply for certification to carry at least a B average. Raising the requirements for every candidate will raise the academic quality of all new teachers - across the board."

The Governor said the Department of Education will re-double its efforts to recruit teachers from top universities in New Jersey and across the nation.

Gov. Whitman also said she hopes to create a voluntary exchange program between the state's 21 teacher-of-the-year winners and the education faculty at New Jersey colleges.

The Governor also said learning should be a lifetime activity, and distance learning opens the doors to many adults who are unable or find it difficult to attend traditional college. By creating the New Jersey Virtual University, the state can provide an online index of distance learning courses from colleges and universities throughout the state.

"Distance learning will never replace the traditional classroom. But it can bring higher education to those who can't get to the classroom. And by helping our institutions reach well beyond our borders, the Virtual University will put New Jersey at the forefront of distance education," Gov. Whitman said.

Health Insurance

Gov. Whitman also called for improving care for the young by expanding the KidCare program which provides health insurance to uninsured children. Last year, the program was created to provide insurance to children whose families earned up to 200 percent of the federal poverty limit. The Governor announced today that the program is now open to families earning up to 350 percent of the federal poverty limit, or \$57,000 for a family of four. Family contributions are based on a sliding scale.

"My ultimate goal is to make health insurance available to every child in this state," Gov. Whitman said. She also directed her Children's Health Insurance Workgroup to develop a plan within 90 days that will make it more affordable for small businesses to provide health insurance to their employees.

Senior Citizens

To help New Jersey's older adults, Gov. Whitman proposed a three-year, \$60 million initiative to help senior citizens stay in their homes by providing easier access to long-term care services in their communities.

"There are still too many seniors being automatically shuttled from hospitals into nursing homes. I want a New Jersey where no one has to go into a nursing home unless they absolutely have to be there and want to be there," Gov. Whitman said.

The Governor proposed several initiatives to make it easier for seniors to stay in their homes and out of nursing homes whenever possible including offering financial assistance and respite care to family caregivers; offering services on a sliding fee scale to the elderly who are not Medicaid-eligible; and providing seniors without family support with personalized, in-home services from home health and homemaker agencies;

The Governor also committed \$2 million for seniors in nursing homes. The Community Choice Counseling Program will be expanded statewide for counselors to work with nursing home residents to determine whether they need - or want - to be in a nursing home. Whenever possible, counselors will work with the resident and family members to identify the most appropriate options for the senior.

Crime

While noting that crime in New Jersey is at its lowest levels in a quarter century, Gov. Whitman proposed legislation requiring that every gun sold in New Jersey include either a safety lock or the new smart gun technology.

"Those school shootings last week and last year happened in other states; next time, it could be our state, our kids, our tragedy," the Governor said. "I don't want one more gun sold in this state without built-in protection for our children."

