



OFFICE OF THE GOVERNOR

NEWS RELEASE

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Remarks of Governor Christine Todd Whitman Annual Mayor's Legislative Day

The Governor today addressed the sixth annual Mayors' Legislative Day of the New Jersey State League of Municipalities. Attached is a copy of her remarks.

REMARKS OF GOVERNOR CHRISTINE TODD WHITMAN ANNUAL MAYORS' LEGISLATIVE DAY WEDNESDAY, FEBRUARY 4, 1998

Thank you, Mayor Wilkinson. And my congratulations to the League officers being sworn-in today.

It is good to meet like this and keep open the lines of communication, especially since we have so much to talk about.

In recent weeks, I've made a number of proposals that would directly affect the way you chart the future of your city or town. How you raise tax revenues. How you approach civil service. How you operate schools. How you manage development. How you keep property taxes under control.

Let me start there, since property taxes are always on everyone's mind. I want to thank the mayors who have agreed to serve on my property tax commission -- Barbara Cannon of Old Bridge, Suzanne Walters of Stone Harbor, Albio Sires of West New York, and Millard Wilkerson of Berlin. The commission's work will provide a solid grounding for the work we must do together in the coming years.

My commitment to property tax relief is real. The Legislature and my administration have proved it time and again - whether the issue is binding arbitration reform or local budget reviews, the Gross Receipts and Franchise Tax or State Mandate/State Pay.

I recognize the commitment you have made. You've worked hard to keep your municipalities affordable. You've made tough choices, and you've looked for more efficient ways of serving the people. That's why property taxes over the past four years have increased by the lowest rate in 20 years.

The proposals outlined in my State of the State address raised the stakes for you, but they also give you more of a hand in keeping property taxes in check.

I raised the stakes with my proposal to allow citizens to vote on any municipal property tax hikes above the rate of inflation. I recognize that the League opposes me on this, but I believe that voters are responsible and deserve a voice. At the same time, this proposal will give you an opportunity to make the case for the efforts you are making in your towns.

To give you a hand in controlling property taxes, I have proposed a number of common-sense civil service reforms. Since so much of a local government's budget is compensation, it's only right that we make the civil service system work better for you and the people you serve.

It's only right that we restructure our compensation system so that pay raises and advancements are based on merit, not simply seniority.

It's only right that we limit the amount of sick leave that local governments pay out to retirees, like we've already done in state government.

And it's only right that we let you decide whether you want to be a part of the civil service system at all.

Of course, I tackled another thorny property tax issue last month: the way we fund and organize public schools. I called for moving school elections to November as a means of encouraging voter participation. And I proposed that we place the issue of school regionalization before the voters in a statewide referendum.

To me, this is a discussion we must have. As you know, I have always strongly opposed state government arbitrarily forcing regionalization. We all recognize, on the other hand, that the current system is not the most efficient use of tax dollars. So it's time we ask whether citizens want to give up some degree of local control of school districts in exchange for lower property taxes.

Obviously, some of these proposals are controversial. And some people around the state have already raised their voices in opposition. I'm not after unanimous support for every proposal. I'm looking to help you keep property taxes from pricing families out of our state.

Let's continue that work. As we anticipate the property tax commission's report, which is due August 1st, let's work together to make real progress in behalf of New Jersey's property taxpayers.

We can also make a difference on another issue that concerns our families: planning our future wisely so there is open space for our children and grandchildren to enjoy.

In my Inaugural Address, I set a goal of preserving 300,000 more acres of open space and farmland in the next four years. And to get us there, I promised to work with the Legislature to establish a stable source of funding this year.

I also intend to place more focus on the State Plan. As you know from taking part in the cross-acceptance process, the State Plan lays out a very sensible approach to strengthening cities, reducing traffic congestion, and curbing suburban sprawl.

It's time to step up our use of the State Plan, not only at the local level but also in state government.

So, for example, I have directed my Cabinet to give priority review to applications that meet the Plan's goal of developing where infrastructure is already in place.

And I've proposed we draw upon a successful pilot program in Long Branch by giving up-front approval to projects in municipalities that commit to comply with the State Plan's recommendations about new development. That will lead to much faster approvals of good projects and, in all likelihood, lower costs for those projects.

What's more, I want to provide you with more tools you may need to make the State Plan work where you live.

One tool is the ability to control growth - a power that the courts recently told West Windsor that you don't now have.

West Windsor enacted a timed-growth ordinance that could have been a model for others to use. Instead, the courts knocked it down, declaring that towns don't have the statutory power to control their own pace of development. I want to change the law. That's why I support legislation like that sponsored by Senator Pete Inverso to give you the statutory power you need.

Of course, one of the core recommendations of the State Plan is to make New Jersey stronger by making our cities stronger. That's why I begin my second term by renewing my commitment to help our cities rebuild.

Last month, I proposed \$400 million in State financing to help cities acquire and redevelop buildings that now stand boarded up because of long-standing tax liens. I also announced a new initiative to help urban churches and other faith-based organizations around the state revitalize their neighborhoods.

We all benefit from vibrant cities that entice new business, welcome visitors, and give their residents the chance to make a better life for themselves and their families.

And, of course, the more we build in cities where the infrastructure is already in place, the more open space we can preserve for future generations and for all time. Indeed, a commitment to cities is a commitment to a higher quality of life for us all.

These are some of my plans for working with you to better serve the citizens of our state. While we may differ on some details, we all want to achieve the same goals for our state. And so I pledge to continue working with you and giving you the tools you need to reach our goals.

Together, we can help keep New Jersey affordable. Together, we can help keep New Jersey livable. Together, city by city and town by town, we can help make New Jersey truly the Best Place to Live in America. Thank you.

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