

Governor Roy Cooper: State of the State

March 13, 2017

Mr. Speaker, Mr. President Pro Tem, Members of the General Assembly, Council of State, Judiciary and my Cabinet and fellow North Carolinians:

The North Carolina Constitution directs the governor come to the legislature, to and I quote, "give to the General Assembly information of the affairs of the State and recommend to their considerations such measures as he shall deem expedient" end quote.

Our Constitution mandates that we work together to make North Carolina better, and it charges the governor to participate in the legislative process. That constitutional directive, and your kind invitation, is why I come tonight.

I didn't come alone. In the gallery are four strong women whom I thank for their never-ending love and support: First Lady, Kristin Cooper, and my daughters Hilary, Natalie and Claire.

I want to begin by reporting to you that the state of our state is promising.

It is promising because of our universities and community colleges, because of our farms and factories, our Research Triangle Park, our banking headquarters, but most of all because of the hardworking people of this state who want it to succeed.

North Carolina is one of the fastest-growing states in America. By 2025, we will have one million more residents. Many of these people will come to North Carolina because we are the state of promise.

People come because of the climate. The mountains and coast. The schools and higher education. They come because of good jobs and opportunity. And people come to our state for the promise of a great life and of good communities. And when they come here, they are welcomed.

There is warmth in the nodding of heads as we walk down the sidewalk. There is a welcoming handshake at the ball field. There are the open arms of entire communities welcoming home veterans who served our country. Our *people* are welcoming.

Our *people* are welcoming.

But some of our *laws* are not.

I'm going to say this first thing because of the urgency and to go ahead and get it out of the way. Tonight, I call on the legislature once again to repeal House Bill 2. The law has damaged our state. The legislature must erase this law from our books. Pass a clean repeal of HB2 and I will sign it the same day.

Pass a compromise repeal that works to eliminate discrimination and brings back jobs, sports and entertainment and I will sign it – as long as it truly gets the job done.

I also raise this issue at the beginning because HB2 is the dark cloud hanging over our state of promise. It drains the energy from what should be our work for the people of this state.

Citizens from Cherokee to Chocowinity are sick of it and they are wondering when we're going to cut away this heavy anchor weighing us down. Let's do it this week. It's time to move on.

HB2 might be a dark cloud, but even the darkest clouds blow over, and I believe we are a state of promise at our core.

Being elected to serve the people of every county, every city, every legislative district, and every community in between helps me realize just how big and diverse our state really is.

It also demands that we listen to the concerns of the people who will hold us accountable, whether they voted for us or not.

I bring their concerns to you today, boiled down this way: I want North Carolinians to be better educated, healthier and have more money in their pockets.

Too many people feel stuck in the middle – not wealthy by any measure, but doing just well enough that the social safety net isn't there for them. They feel left behind by a system that isn't listening to them and an economy that isn't rewarding them for their hard work.

The budget I shared two weeks ago reflects the priorities of North Carolina's hard-working people. It contains no increase in taxes. It rejects the false "either/or" choice of either saving or investing. Instead, my budget puts hundreds of millions of dollars in our rainy day fund while committing to a future of growth.

I call this budget "Common Ground Solutions" because it contains many areas of agreement.

In Raleigh, partisan battles, power struggles and lawsuits might grab the headlines, but we have to work together where we can. To look beyond ourselves to see what's right for the state, regardless of who's in power.

That's what the people of North Carolina want us to do, and what common sense demands us to do. So let's get to work.

Job recruitment, raising teacher pay, fighting the opioid crisis, boosting our infrastructure and recovering from natural disasters that have damaged our communities. These are areas where we already agree more than we disagree. These tasks don't come with a party label for a reason. They are priorities we all share.

Let me first address making North Carolinians better educated. As I have traveled the width and breadth of North Carolina, it doesn't matter where I am or who I'm talking to, people want us to make education better.

When I'm recruiting a business to come here - to your legislative districts, the first thing they ask is whether North Carolina has the workers skilled enough to fill the jobs they create.

Improving education is an area where we can find common ground. We have to measure our progress and hold ourselves accountable.

That's why I've laid out aggressive goals to make North Carolina a Top Ten Educated State by 2025 – emphasizing early childhood education, increasing enrollment in pre-kindergarten, improving our high school graduation rate and increasing the percentage of adults with a higher education degree.

My budget creates nearly 4,700 additional Pre-Kindergarten slots to eliminate the wait-list of at-risk four year olds. Getting more kids in pre-K means they'll arrive at school ready to learn. It's the foundation for a lifetime of success, showing economic and health benefits well beyond their pre-K years. And it allows both parents to stay in the workforce, a necessity for many North Carolina families.

Top CEOs in our state are promoting early childhood education because they know it makes a difference. Research proves that investing in quality early childhood education generates high returns, where \$1 of investment yields \$7 in return or even higher.

To help families afford the cost of quality childcare, I'm also proposing that we reinstate the Child Care and Dependent Tax Credit, which also applies to those caring for aging parents.

As our children move from early childhood to grade school, we entrust our teachers with their futures every single day. Let's put our money where our trust is and raise teacher salaries.

My plan gives an average 10% raise over the next two years. On this pace, we can bring teacher salaries up to best in the Southeast in three years and to at least the national average in five years.

And my budget gives every single teacher a raise, valuing the experienced teachers as well as those new to the job.

Wendell Tabb, with us here tonight, is a 30-year veteran teacher in Durham whose experience in the classroom is a benefit for his students, and other teachers. Wendell is here representing thousands of veteran teachers who are making education better.

Thanks for all you do, Wendell!

Despite paychecks stretched too thin already, our teachers often dip into their own pockets to buy basic school supplies. Wake County teacher Jasmine Lauer, who is here with us tonight, is all too familiar with this crunch. She wants her students to have everything they need. For her, that means buying books for her students online, one at a time, until they eventually have a full set. Jasmine represents so many selfless teachers who want their students to have what they need. Thanks for your sacrifice, Jasmine!

My budget proposes an annual \$150 supply bonus to help teachers cover the cost of supplies. It won't cover everything, but it's a tangible sign of our appreciation and respect.

We're also joined tonight by Sabrina Peacock, a teacher from Guilford County. Sabrina entered the classroom as a North Carolina Teaching Fellow and today teaches 3rd grade at Oak Hill Elementary, a Title One school, working to ensure that every student has access to a quality education.

We must recruit our best students to become teachers. That's why my budget would create \$10,000 Best and Brightest scholarships for students who commit to spending three to four years in the classroom, like Sabrina did. I understand some legislators want to do this, too. Let's find common ground so we can get more of these great teachers. Thanks for bringing your talents to the teaching profession, Sabrina!

In my talks with business owners, I hear time and again that they have job openings, but can't find workers with the skills necessary to fill them.

We know the problem and we have the answer: educated workers with high-tech critical thinking skills, earned at our high schools, community colleges and universities.

To give people in the middle class more opportunity to afford higher education, let's pass a workforce program we call NC GROW - Getting Ready for Opportunities in the Workforce. It means free community college—a scholarship to cover last-dollar tuition and fees for recent high school graduates to attend a North Carolina community college.

To earn it, young people have to make good grades and apply for already-existing scholarships, loans and grant programs. It's an idea that Republican and Democratic governors alike have supported in other states. We can make it a bipartisan reality here in North Carolina.

Yes, there's a price tag on these investments in education. But now that the economy is rebounding, it's time to make smart, strategic investments in our people.

We cannot sacrifice education at the altar of even more corporate tax cuts or giveaways that are mostly for the wealthiest. Changes to our tax code need to focus on relief for working families – not corporations and millionaires.

Next, let's work together to get more money in the pockets of North Carolina families by bringing and growing more good-paying jobs to our state and to your legislative districts.

One of the most important steps that the legislature can take is to fund our education budget. An educated workforce is a competitive workforce, and companies are in a global search for talent. Let's take advantage of our intellectual capital.

There are other strategic steps we can take to make our state more competitive – funding to prepare mega-sites to attract large-scale, advanced manufacturing.

Workforce technical training that is more nimble and customized to what companies say they need.

Encouraging more people to get into high-paying trades, like plumbing and electrical work, or medical research and high tech engineering.

Incentives to bring the film industry back to North Carolina. Initiatives to harness the innovation and entrepreneurship happening right now at our world-class universities and in our cities.

Encouraging renewable energy which is already bringing good jobs to our state.

Providing help for small business. And a focus on rural broadband access, which is a must for economic success in our rural communities. We cannot leave them behind.

Tonight we're joined by Charlotte Vick. Vick Family Farms in Wilson has expanded its sweet potato crops in recent years and is rapidly increasing production to meet global demand, including building a new 50,000 square foot packaging facility.

Sixty percent of Vick Family Farms' customer base is overseas and access to broadband internet has allowed the company to compete, manage shipments, and grow their business.

We must do more to help rural small businesses and family farms grow. High-speed broadband access is key to their success, in fact, a necessity, in a global marketplace. Thanks for your hard work and innovation, Charlotte!

Finally, our economy is recovering. But our unemployment rate is still 5.3 percent, the same as last January, and that is still slightly above the national average. Meanwhile, our Unemployment Trust Fund has grown to more than two billion dollars.

That's good. But we must use this opportunity and these funds to help for those who can't find work, while also taking a deeper look at those who are chronically unemployed.

The Governor and the legislature need to work together to get better-paying jobs for North Carolina. We have good opportunities to make that happen in the coming months.

We also need to see that North Carolinians are healthier. While we've made progress in getting more people health insurance, we still have an alarming gap in coverage that we're all paying for with high-priced indigent care.

Yet there's a new healthcare landscape in our country, filled with uncertainty. We have to sit down and have serious discussions about improving access to care for people who don't have it.

Most of these are people who work hard but find it tough to afford to see a doctor. We also have rural hospitals that struggle to stay open and provide good health care across the state.

If we work together, we can improve the health of thousands of North Carolinians.

One of the most frightening developments in our country and state is the opioid and substance abuse crisis. It threatens lives, rips apart families and can create a shortage of qualified workers.

In my hometown of Nashville, North Carolina, Police Chief Tom Bashore is working to combat this addiction crisis. Last February, Chief Bashore and the Nashville Police Department launched the "Hope Initiative," the first program in North Carolina encouraging opioid addicts to walk into a police station seeking treatment without fear of arrest.

Recognizing that addiction is a disease, Chief Bashore has engaged with the community to eliminate the stigma surrounding opioid addiction and encourage addicts to seek treatment. He knows that prevention is part of strong and effective law enforcement. I'm proud to have Chief Bashore join us here tonight. We must support his work and the work of those offering treatment in communities across our state. Thanks, Chief!

My budget directs mental health and law enforcement funding in a multi-pronged approach to combat the substance abuse crisis. This is an area where we must find common ground to help our friends and neighbors gripped by addiction.

Being healthy also means clean air and water. An emphasis on renewable energy can achieve that, and it will help our economy sustain good-paying jobs. We've seen the positive results already.

Finally, I urge cooperation as we work to rebuild the thousands of homes, businesses, schools and roads damaged by last year's storms. No solution is as easy or as quick as we want it to be, but I pledge to continue working with North Carolina's Congressional delegation and you in the General Assembly to help residents rebuild in those 50 hard-hit counties.

We have made progress in a few key categories that I am pleased to report to you tonight. In just the past couple of months, we've been able to repair and reopen more than 100 roads, and help hundreds of families return home or find other places to live.

But nearly 600 households are still in need of permanent housing. We will not forget these families, and must keep working together to help them.

One thing that has become clear during the disaster recovery is the lack of affordable, available housing in eastern North Carolina that has hindered relocation efforts. That's why I am asking you to work with me to restore allowing the use of federal money for housing so we can start to build our way out of this affordable housing shortage.

Tonight, we have a remarkable young lady with us who represents the very best of our state's resilient spirit. In 2015, before the storm, 12-year-old Mackenzie Hinson, from Grantham, founded "Make A Difference Food Pantry" to help people in her community. After the devastation of Hurricane Matthew, Mackenzie and her volunteers went into overdrive. Following the hurricane, her pantry's shelves were empty and friends and family members lost homes.

But Mackenzie and her team were not deterred. With the help of businesses and volunteers, they restocked and got to work.

After Hurricane Matthew, Make A Difference Food Pantry was open for 42 straight days, serving 6,914 hot meals and distributing food boxes and toiletry items to over 8,000 people in Wayne, Johnston, and Sampson counties.

Mackenzie, thank you for being here tonight and for being an inspiration. By following your example, we will rebuild our communities and be a stronger state than ever. Good work, Mackenzie!

Serving the people of North Carolina is the honor of my lifetime.

Standing in this well tonight, I'm reminded of my years in these seats, serving with Democratic and Republican governors who worked together to solve problems.

You make the decision to sacrifice your privacy, time with family and in some cases, your income, to be here. For that, I salute you.

When we take the oath of office, we take on the weight of tremendous responsibility. A responsibility to uphold our constitution, in voting laws, in classrooms, in health care. To act in the best interest of the people who elected us. To leave North Carolina better than we found it.

To do that, we must put politics aside and work together. And in order to maintain North Carolina as a state of promise, I will make a few promises.

I promise to listen, to engage, to build consensus, to compromise when possible. I promise to fight only when we can't come to agreement or when you leave me no choice. I promise to make sure state government employs people who look like the people it represents.

To find the common ground we seek, let's listen to North Carolinians urging us to set aside divisive social issues and political power struggles. Instead, let's focus on teacher pay and jobs — the issues families face and talk about every day around their kitchen tables.

Back in the late 1990s, this House was controlled by Republicans while I was in the Senate, controlled by Democrats. We disagreed and fought. And I spent many late nights here, talking and negotiating. But we found common ground on raising teacher salaries to the national average. We found common ground on expanding Smart Start and cutting taxes for the middle class. Republicans and Democrats can find common ground if we work on it.

We can find common ground on education. We can find common ground on health care and the opioid epidemic. We can find common ground on raising the juvenile age. We will find common ground on jobs, economic development and further hurricane and wildfire recovery. We will find this agreement because too much is at stake if we don't.

The people of North Carolina are watching us. Over the next few months, let's fulfill our promise and demonstrate to North Carolina and beyond, that there is enough room for all of us on that common ground. God bless you, our country, and the great state of North Carolina.

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