

Cuomo's Sweeping Vision For New York

by {ga=dking}

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ALBANY, N.Y. — Gov. Andrew Cuomo delivered a sweeping policy vision in his third annual State of the State address — as well as a stern warning to the U.S. Congress not to delay passage of the \$60 billion Superstorm Sandy relief package.

“Don’t play politics with New York,” Cuomo said in the nearly two-hour speech on Wednesday. “Remember New York because New York will not forget, I promise you.”

With the kind of emotion previously unseen from the governor, Cuomo’s ambitious agenda for

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2013 included major proposals on gun control, equality for women, education reform that would extend the school day, campaign finance disclosure rules that would be the toughest in the nation and plans to combat environmental change and protect New York City from severe weather.

It remains to be seen whether there is the political will to get his agenda done. He will still have to convince a Legislature riven by party factions. And Senate Republicans, who control their chamber with a breakaway group of Democrats, oppose many of Cuomo's policy positions.

So what do Cuomo's proposals mean for New York City? And can Cuomo accomplish them all? Most city politicians were waiting to hear from Cuomo on four main issues — hurricane recovery, gun control, the minimum wage and stop-and-frisk.

HURRICANE SANDY

He used his speech to unveil a series of policies designed to better maintain the state's infrastructure, keep a ready emergency response force and assist those in storm-ravaged areas.

For instance, Cuomo said he wanted to change building codes to make sure construction in flood zones is able to withstand extreme weather, he offered a plan that would buy-out residents who live in areas that have suffered through repeat flood damage and perhaps most ferociously demanded that Congress move quickly to give New York disaster relief aid.

Cuomo listed the amount of time it has historically taken Congress to respond to modern disasters and noted that it has taken Congress longer to act on Hurricane Sandy relief than on any other disaster. "This is an unprecedented situation in modern times where the federal government has not been responsive in the face of a disaster."

Cuomo also lit into the Long Island Power Authority, saying he wants to abolish the entity. LIPA was blamed for extended power outages in Long Island and Queens. Cuomo also proposed establishing a volunteer corps to respond to disasters whenever they are needed.

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Cuomo advocated the possibility of “hardening” the city’s infrastructure, including using flood gates, vents and pumps to protect from flooding. And he also said he wanted to tackle climate change by lowering the caps on greenhouse gasses.

Queens Sen. Joe Addabbo, whose district was ravaged by Hurricane Sandy, said he was impressed. “The governor was right on every point,” Addabbo said. “We really need to look at and learn from Sandy. We need to rebuild in a way that we are going to benefit from in the long run.”

Addabbo added that he feels New York should press to make sure there are no conditions attached to federal recovery aid. “We had so many conditions with the stimulus funds that it took forever to get used,” he said. “There should be no strings attached because no one should tell these municipalities that have been dealing with the storm on the ground for months how they should do things.”

GUN CONTROL

Cuomo proposed a set of sweeping gun restrictions, including making high-capacity ammunition magazines illegal; banning private sales of guns over the internet that circumvent background checks; and amending New York’s assault weapons ban to “end the unnecessary risk of high-capacity assault rifles.”

“I say to you: Forget the extremists. It's simple, no one hunts with an assault rifle,” Cuomo shouted. “No one needs 10 bullets to kill a deer and too many innocent people have died already. End the madness, now!”

Cuomo’s proposal failed to deliver some points supported by gun control advocates, Mayor Michael Bloomberg and Democratic legislators. But gun-control advocates were generally pleased by what they did hear.

“New York State has led the nation with strong, common-sense gun laws, and the governor’s new proposals will build on that tradition,” Bloomberg said in a statement. “They will help law enforcement keep guns out of the hands of criminals and other dangerous people and save lives. We strongly support his proposals to close loopholes and strengthen existing laws, and we look forward to working with him and the State Legislature to adopt them.”

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Senate Republicans are advocating increasing penalties for criminals who use weapons in the commission of a crime and are generally reluctant to enact tougher gun laws and upset their conservative base. During Cuomo's speech, Republican Sen. Greg Ball tweeted: "Guv Cuomo, the Second Amendment isn't in the constitution for our right 'to kill deer'. Read the constitution..."

Negotiations over a gun-control package were reportedly coming to a head on Monday night, and there was speculation a session to vote on the bill could be held later this week but as of now it appears legislators are heading home and will return next week. "I think we are done voting on things in the middle of the night after getting handed the bill," Addabbo said. "It's better we take the time and do this right and save more lives in the long run."

MINIMUM WAGE

The issue of a minimum wage increase has hovered around Albany since last year's State of the State Address. Assembly Speaker Sheldon Silver used his pre-SOS comments to make a wage increase a priority. Cuomo expressed varying levels of support for the measure over last year. The Republican Senate pushed hard against the measure calling it a "jobs killer." Last December Cuomo added support of a minimum wage increase to a litmus test of legislation legislators would have to support to earn his backing.

Cuomo took things one step further in his SOS, saying he wanted an increase from the current \$7.25 to \$8.75. That kind of specificity was surprising to many legislators. Silver proposed an increase of \$8.50. It's a large jump for Cuomo who ramblingly explained on a radio interview last May that it simply wasn't possible to get a minimum wage increase at the time. "Do I think it is likely that we're going to have a resolution on minimum wage this year?" Cuomo rhetorically asked on The Capitol Pressroom. "No. Not because I wouldn't like to see one, I very much would like to see one. I don't think it's possible. We hope for the ideal and live in the real, right?"

Advocates at the annual "People's State of the State" held this past Monday advocated for a \$10 minimum wage.

Mark Dunlea of Hunger Action of New York applauded Cuomo for the proposal but added: "It is less than the \$10 an hour most New Yorkers support ... There was no mention of indexing the hike to inflation or doing the hike in just one step, both of which are critical. We look forward to

additional details.”

STOP-AND-FRISK

Last year, Cuomo advocated reducing criminal penalties for possession of small amounts of marijuana. The move was seen as an attempt to reduce the impact of stop-and-frisk technique employed by the New York Police Department that leads to the arrest of a high percentage of black and Latino youth. The measure failed as it faced major opposition from Senate Republicans. This year Cuomo brought even more passion to his proposal — describing how arrest records can severely impact the future of disadvantaged young people. “This is not fair, its not right, it must end and it must end now!” Cuomo declared.

Councilman Jumaane Williams, who has been an outspoken opponent of the stop-and-frisk policy, issued a statement saying: "I was quite pleased to hear Governor Cuomo's continued commitment to addressing the NYPD's failed policy of stop, question and frisk. The State Legislature should have passed the decriminalization of marijuana in public view last year, and it is on State Senators Dean Skelos and Jeff Klein now to deliver.”

ELECTION REFORM

In perhaps his boldest proposal, Cuomo outlined a plan that would require political and lobbying donations to be reported electronically within 48 hours. The move would cut through the bramble of confusing disclosure requirements currently mandated by state law. Many see the move as a compromise that would stand in for a fully taxpayer-funded system because Senate Republicans steadfastly oppose public funding of elections. Republican Leader Sen. Dean Skelos seemed to support the disclosure requirements but implied that public financing of elections was a non-starter. Good government groups including Citizen Action NY, The Brennan Center and Citizens Union all praised Cuomo for his reform proposals.

WOMENS' RIGHTS

In a surprise move, Cuomo debuted a major package of women's rights initiatives. Interestingly, the reforms include equal pay, protection against discrimination in the workplace for pregnancy and would make abortion rights a part of state law were a major focus of Senate Democrats last year during session and the election. “It's her body, it's her choice!” Cuomo shouted three times after unveiling the measure. Cuomo referred to his daughters a number of times during this segment of the speech.

Women's groups responded positively to Cuomo's proposals. “No pregnant woman should have

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to choose between her job and a healthy pregnancy,” said Diana Bakst, of A Better Balance. “Explicit protection is absolutely necessary to ensure equal opportunity for pregnant women and mothers in the workplace and to provide economic security for them and their families.”

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Image of Cuomo at the State of the State address courtesy of the governor's office.