John Liu's Big Speech

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NEW YORK — City Comptroller John C. Liu called for raising the minimum wage, leveling the playing field for small businesses and making higher education more affordable for New Yorkers

in a wide-ranging speech yesterday — his second state of the city address — in front of hundreds of people, including several elected officials.

With a showy introduction that included singing elementary school children performing "We're all in this together" from the High School Musical and a contemporary dance performance, Liu's speech was the ambitious, sweeping kind you might expect from someone who has made his ambitions to be the next mayor well known — not the talking points of the city's "chief financial officer." Liu is the only comptroller in the city's history to deliver a state of the city speech.

"New York should be a city where working men and women can afford to make ends meet," Liu said, striking a populist tenor that seemed to put him on the progressive side of the Democratic Party. "We have to continue to speak up for the working poor."

The elected officials in the crowd included Borough Presidents Scott Stringer, Ruben Diaz Jr. and Marty Markowitz; Assemblymen Guillermo Linares and David Weprin; state Sen. Kevin Parker; and Council members Daniel Dromm, Gale Brewer, Robert Jackson, Jumaane Williams and Ydanis Rodriguez.

"For me he touched on concrete issues that are important to our community," Rodriguez said after the 50-minute speech.

The New York Post said of Liu's speech : "All that was missing from John Liu's campaign-style â€ state of the city' lollapalooza at John Jay College yesterday were fireworks and a balloon drop." The newspaper continued, "He needs to just go away, and to stage his circuses on his own dime."

A cloud of scandal overshadows Liu's presumed ambitions to run for mayor in 2013 after federal authorities began investigating fundraising improprieties by his campaign. A fundraiser for Liu and his campaign treasurer have been arrested and are facing trial.

The scandal went unmentioned by Liu. And there was plenty of policy substance to Liu's speech, even if there is very little he could do to channel them into actual law. "All of these

proposals can't be done locally. They must be approved by Albany," said Doug Turetsky, of the city's Independent Budget Office.

Even so, Liu has shown a knack for using his bully pulpit as the comptroller to push for his agenda, from reforming the NYPD dress code to allow Sikhs to wear long beards and turbans to improving high school graduation rates.

"In times like these it's not just managing our money," Liu said during the speech delivered at John Jay College. "It's managing the impossible. But New Yorkers deserve it and the people of our city are counting on it to make our lives easier, better, and fairer. Every dollar does something so every saving means something."

Here are three of Liu's major policy proposals:

Increase the minimum wage by $4.25

Some in the audience applauded in unison after Liu called for an increase in the minimum wage. "If you are serious about narrowing the wealth gap, we need to have the courage to pay all New Yorkers a livable minimum wage," Liu said.

Though he also pointed out that he supports legislators in Albany were working to raise the wage to $8.50 an hour, he said the cost of living in the city is much higher and that that amount of pay "buys a lot more in Buffalo and Rochester than it does in the Bronx and Brooklyn."

Eliminate the city's taxes for some businesses

Liu announced his proposal to eliminate the city's general corporations tax for businesses with less than $5,000 in assets, which would help roughly 240,000 businesses. He also proposed that 25,000 businesses — such as neighborhood pizza stores, dry cleaners, vegetable grocers, and home repair contractors — be exempt from the unincorporated business tax, costing the city $100 million.

Liu said he proposed offsetting the cost of saving small businesses by closing corporate

loopholes. The comptroller plans to require insurance companies, which are currently exempt, to pay the general tax, and private equity firms to pay a tax on all profits from assets held as investments.

He also said he wanted Madison Square Garden to start paying a property tax, which he says costs the city $15 million a year.

“I love the Knicks even though they sent Jeremy Lin to Houston, but the Garden should be kicking in its fair share just like everyone else,” Liu said.

Turetsky said what is particularly unusual about the property tax exemption on Madison Square Garden is that it is on privately owned land, unlike places like Citi Field, Yankee Stadium and the Barclays Center. “It’s unusual for that kind of tax break to be done without an expiration date,” he said.

Making education more affordable

Liu also proposed making tuition free for all students of the city’s public colleges as he cited the Macaulay Honors College program — a highly-selective honors program throughout the city’s public colleges offering free tuition and academic scholarships to students. Liu said the tuition for the city’s public colleges should be free for the top 10 percent of students from public high schools bringing the City University of New York at the “level of a competitive prize” while also acting as a life-saver to working families.

Elvia Martinez, 17, a senior from the Abraham Lincoln high school in Coney Island, Brooklyn who is applying to two CUNY colleges said the proposal for free tuition for the best high school students was a good idea.

“More people would have the opportunity to go to college,” said Martinez, who said she hopes to become an accountant like Liu someday, though her parents also have to pay college tuition for her two sisters and brother.

Councilman Rodriguez, who is also chair of the Council’s committee on higher education, said

he was happy to hear the comptroller's focus on "concrete initiatives" like building partnerships with high schools and public colleges and guaranteeing free tuition for the best students from public schools.

"I am very thankful to the comptroller for his position on everything but especially the college readiness piece. I believe the city will move in the fastest way if we prepare our men and women to be the new leaders."

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