

courier-journal.com

February 5, 2009

Beshear calls for budget bravery, review of KERA

Governor urges bravery on budget

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FRANKFORT, Ky. -- Gov. Steve Beshear called last night for a "thorough review" of Kentucky's 1990 education-reform law and made a strong pitch for a major cigarette-tax increase as a crucial element in balancing the beleaguered state budget.

In a 33-minute State of the Commonwealth address, delivered to a joint session of the General Assembly in the House chamber, the governor commended the bravery of Kentuckians in responding to last week's ice storm and said the state's leaders must act in a similar fashion in responding to the economic crisis.

"The winter storms ... devastated our Kentucky communities," he said. "But Kentuckians from west to east responded with courage, resiliency and concern for their neighbors. My friends, they have the right to expect no less from us."

The governor's call to review the Kentucky Education Reform Act was an unexpected, and brief, part of the speech, which emphasized the important role that government has to play in solving the state's problems.

"Kentucky impressed the nation in 1990 with its commitment to reshaping its school system, and the benefits for our children and our state have been significant and measurable," he said. "But that was nearly two decades ago. Let us now bring together education, business and legislative leaders to not only clear our course and see if any corrective steering is necessary, but just as importantly to renew and re-energize our commitment to education."

The 1990 law dramatically increased funding for public schools and made radical changes in such areas as the way they are governed and how progress is assessed through testing.

The testing program, in particular, has been a frequent target of Senate Republicans, who contend that it doesn't give teachers information that can be used to identify deficiencies in individual students.

But Beshear provided no details in his speech about what the review would encompass, or when it would be undertaken.

The governor said afterward that he is not pushing for any particular changes in the education reform act. But he added that, after nearly 20 years, it's time to review the law's effectiveness.

'A very good job'

Senate President David Williams, R-Burkesville, said Beshear made a forceful pitch for his budget-balancing plan but also noted that the governor is open to changes.

"I'm prepared to support additional revenue personally," Williams said. "But what I'm prepared to do does not indicate what the Senate is prepared to do."

House Majority Leader Rocky Adkins, D-Sandy Hook, said he thought "the governor did a very good job tonight. I thought he was very sincere and very emotional."

The issue dominating the legislative session is the projected \$459 million revenue shortfall in the current fiscal year, which ends June 30.

"How we handle this immediate, short-term budget problem will dictate our long-term ability to position our state for success," Beshear said.

The budget-balancing plan the governor proposed in December calls for additional spending cuts and for raising the cigarette tax from the current 30 cents a pack to \$1 as a way to avoid or reduce cuts in priority areas such as education, safety and health.

"To protect our priorities we need the targeted application of new revenue, which I propose we obtain by significantly increasing our tax on cigarettes and other tobacco products," he said last night.

Beshear emphasized the "devastating" toll smoking takes on the state and noted that a recent federal report said Kentucky leads the nation in smoking-related deaths. "How many more statistics do we need before we do the right thing for Kentuckians?" he said.

Beshear, a Democrat, praised lawmakers for putting politics aside during the debate on balancing the budget and emphasized he was open to their ideas. Key members of the House and Senate continue to meet in an effort to forge an agreement on a plan.

Confident of agreement

"We have all reached across the aisle like never before because we know the stakes are too high for political games," he said, singling out for praise as many Republicans, including Williams, as Democrats.

Beshear said balancing the budget solely by cutting spending would cripple services for the needy and make it even harder to recover from the recession.

"My friends, that is not survival," he said. "That is surrender, and Kentuckians don't surrender."

The governor said he was confident he could reach agreement with legislative leaders on a budget-balancing plan, as well as on other administration initiatives.

Those included modernizing the state's economic development incentive programs, reducing soaring prison costs, enhancing energy research and improving early childhood education.

"Next week I plan to unveil a task force on early childhood development and education that will streamline and strengthen our network of child services and programs to create better coordination, less duplication and more consistent and higher standards," he said.

The one issue that was conspicuous by its absence from the speech was expanded gambling, his top priority during last year's legislative session.

His proposed constitutional amendment to allow casino gambling, as a way to generate more revenue, failed to pass last year.

And this year he has deferred to House Speaker Greg Stumbo, who is pushing a bill to allow video slots at the state's horse tracks -- a change that Stumbo contends would not require a constitutional amendment.

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Reporters Deborah Yetter and Joseph Gerth contributed to this story.