

As the 2008 legislative session gets under way, the League is going to bring back to life an old friend called “Capitol Beat.” This bi-weekly update will contain legislative information about League issues, as well as political gossip. We will also outline the budget and of course, will chronicle the always-lively end of session.

Capitol Beat
Volume 1, Issue 1

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2008 began as always with the State of the State address given by Governor Eliot Spitzer to start his second year in office. The Capitol was abuzz with anticipation about how the Governor would try to resurrect himself after what was a disastrous first year in office. Would the Governor extend an olive branch to the legislature and make this session a more collaborative and cooperative one? Would the vitriol that followed the “troopergate” scandal continue to suck the air out of Albany as it did last summer and fall or would the petty bickering and name calling end? Many insiders in Albany believe that until the 2008 legislative elections are over, the Senate will do whatever it can to stymie and weaken the Governor. A special election will also occur soon for the seat being vacated by the retiring Senator James Wright, Republican of Jefferson/Oswego/St. Lawrence County who will become an energy lobbyist. This special election will be hard fought and until then, Senate majority is down to one vote.

The Governor began his State of the State Address by extending his condolences to Majority Leader Joe Bruno on the loss of his wife, Barbara. Mr. Spitzer then went through a litany of issues he will promote as solutions to the problems that New Yorkers consider to be their top priorities. It was clear from the tone of his speech, plus by the many time he mentioned legislators by name, that this was an attempt to show the legislature that he was willing to work with them cooperatively. It was much less a “steamroller” speech and much more a “lets govern together” speech. The speech included the following initiatives:

- Education Accountability – the Governor restated his commitment to improving the quality of our schools that was begun last session with his 2007/2008 budget, where a formula was enacted designed to direct aid increases to the highest need school districts. In this State of the State, the Governor was clear that unless investment is tied to accountability that increased aid would be wasted and our educational system would not become an engine of economic growth and opportunity. The Governor also reiterated several measures to further enhance the initiatives he began last session.
- Higher Education – the Governor talked about strengthening our economy while making higher education affordable for every New Yorker. In his State of the State, he endorsed recommendations made by the Commission on Higher Education including:

- o Full-Time Faculty: The Commission found that existing levels of full-time faculty in New York's public higher education systems are well below the levels in comparable institutions in other states.

- o Research and Development: Our colleges and universities play an essential role in conducting research and development activities that foster economic growth, and the State should encourage world class research efforts, which could include making funding available to underwrite meritorious scientific and technological research projects.
- o Community Colleges: Students seeking to transfer from community colleges to senior colleges often do not receive full credit for the courses they have completed. The resulting duplication of classes drains both the wallets and financial aid eligibility of those students who can least afford the added burden.

The Governor will propose in his budget the establishment of a higher education endowment, which initially would be at least \$4 billion dollars.

- Property Tax Relief, Cap, and Reforms – the Governor obviously has recognized the angst of the New York taxpayer when it comes to property tax increases in the state. He spent much time during the speech outlining both the challenges and his approach to relieving the property tax burden on state taxpayers. These included:
 - o Direct Relief: The Governor’s Executive Budget will provide another round of property tax rebates targeting the most amount of relief to middle class homeowners.
 - o Mandate Relief: The Executive Budget will include a series of mandate relief proposals and initiatives to help school districts and local governments control costs.
 - o Property Tax Commission: Governor Spitzer will appoint a bipartisan Commission with Moreland Act investigatory powers to examine school district property taxes. The Commission will be headed by County Executive, Tom Suozzi.

Last year, Governor Spitzer initiated a Middle Class STAR Rebate program targeting over \$1 billion in relief directly to 3 million households with incomes below \$90,000 upstate and \$120,000 in the higher cost New York City metropolitan region. The League opposed this STAR Rebate program and will continue to advocate the League’s alternative approach to property tax relief.

- Health Care – the Governor spoke extensively on his initiatives for improving both access to health care and quality health care. He spoke about chronic disease management targeting childhood obesity, diabetes, and heart disease. His initiatives under this issue include:
 - o Enacting the Healthy Schools Act an issue that was introduced last session and was caught up in the end of session acrimony. The Governor has restated his intention to submit similar legislation with the executive budget incorporation this session many recommendations, which were made by the legislature during last year’s debate on the issue. This proposal will include funding in the executive budget.

- Health insurance for all children – last session the Governor and the legislature proposed expanding children’s access to healthcare by allowing subsidized coverage under Child Health Plus for children from families with income up to 400% of the federal poverty level – which would make health insurance accessible to all 400,000 children. The current eligibility limit is 250% of the federal poverty level. The federal government blocked the proposed expansion of New York’s version of the federal program, Child Health Plus. Therefore:
 - The Governor’s Executive Budget will include full funding for the planned expansion of Child Health Plus, which will provide access to health insurance coverage for all of the 400,000 uninsured children in New York State.
 - State support will be provided, along with an increase in family contributions tied to income level, to fully fund the planned expansion of Child Health Plus from 250% to 400% of the Federal Poverty Level.
 - The Department of Health is streamlining enrollment and renewal procedures to ensure that eligible individuals are able to get and keep coverage under Child Health Plus, Medicaid, and Family Health Plus.
 - The Governor also proposed the use of electronic health records to provide individuals with the ability to access their individualized health care information whenever and wherever they choose. The Governor feels this will improve the quality and efficiency of care while reducing health care costs and medical errors.
 - The Governor also noted that there is a serious shortage of physicians in rural and poor urban areas throughout New York. Over ¼ of the State’s population live in areas designated “underserved” by proper health care providers.
 - To help alleviate this shortage the Governor’s Executive Budget will propose programs to provide physicians and clinics grants and enhances reimbursement rates designed to encourage new primary care and specialist physicians to establish or join existing practices in rural and inner-city underserved communities.
 - Specifically, the Budget will propose a new education loan repayment program tied to service in underserved communities.
- Campaign Finance Reform – in the last paragraph of his State of the State address, the Governor spoke briefly about items from the last year that were not finished. In that paragraph, he mentioned campaign finance reform.

As many of you are aware, reform issues were prominently part of the Governor’s 2007 Inaugural State of the State address. During the 2007 regular session and long into the summer and fall, the League met frequently on the second floor with the Governor’s top staff. Local League participated in forums bringing the issue to the public and putting our state Senators and Assemblymembers on the record. We also testified in late June before the Senate Elections Committee. The Governor, last session, made campaign finance reform a condition of getting a legislative pay raise

which was another of the League's initiatives; a pay raise for judges. This initiative suffered because it was linked to legislative pay raises and subsequently to campaign finance reform. The League made it clear at that time that these substantive issues should not be linked and should stand on their own merit. We will continue to advocate for these pay raise issues in the 2008 legislative session.

Campaign finance reform will remain a top priority issue this session and we will continue to work with the Governor's office to put forward comprehensive and real campaign finance reform. We will also vigorously urge that following the Senate hearings on campaign finance reform the Senate needs to come forward with a bill and the Assembly needs to again pass its legislation. Both houses then need to go to conference committee with their bills so that their differences can be worked out. This is an election year and we intend to beat all legislators over the head with this issue until there is comprehensive campaign finance reform.

These are a few of the League issues which were addressed in the Governor's State of the State address, if you would like more information on his address, please visit the Governor's website: <http://www.state.ny.us/governor/sos/index.html>.

Like the first day of school, much comradery and good feelings marked the first day of the legislative session. There were several receptions following the State of the State address where legislators and lobbyists gathered to wish one another a happy new year and wallow, for at least a day, in good feelings. Next week the legislature returns, the battle begins, and the League will be there.

And the beat goes on.....

