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Napolitano vows to secure border

Speech also touts teacher pay raises, tax cuts

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As 4,000 people rallied for immigrants rights Monday on the Capitol lawn, Democratic Gov. Janet Napolitano vowed to beef up border security and punish companies that intentionally hire undocumented workers.

Riding a booming economy, Napolitano also called for tax cuts for small businesses and vehicle owners, and pay hikes for state employees and teachers.

Her fourth State of the State address featured ideas that could affect just about everyone in Arizona, from battling crime by cracking down on the distribution of methamphetamine to boosting education by improving the base pay for teachers.

Republicans quickly claimed credit for many of her proposals, suggesting she stole them from their own playbook. And some Hispanic activists objected to her immigration agenda, saying she sounded too much like a conservative Republican.

For Napolitano, the speech offered an opportunity to begin this year's legislative session - and, indirectly, her 2006 re-election campaign - by mixing the tough language of a prosecutor with the more moderate tones of a leader devoted to families, schools and children.

After urging all Arizonans to work together to "raise up children who are healthy and wise," she blasted outlaws who smuggle immigrants across the border as "vicious criminals who exploit misery and prey on fear."

"We are going to fine them, break their criminal syndicates apart and bring the full weight of the law down on them," said Napolitano, a former Arizona attorney general. "We will strengthen the border with the people and equipment we need to fight crime and increase border security for lawful commerce, tourism and legal immigration."

Stream of speeches

While Napolitano was talking tough on immigration inside the chambers of the House of Representatives, backers of the group Inmigrantes Sin Fronteras, or Immigrants Without Borders, stood around a makeshift stage to listen to a steady stream of speeches, mostly in Spanish, that called for compassion in immigration laws. One man beat a drum that punctuated chants, in Spanish, that said, "We're here. We're not going away." The protest lasted for most of the day.

Some of Napolitano's proposals bothered members of the Hispanic community who marched around the Capitol with signs that read, "Who will protect the good hard-working decent people?" They chanted: "Sí se puede" or "Yes, we can."

"She's trying to get re-elected in the next election and not trying to fix the problem," said immigration activist Salvador Reza, who heads Tonatierra, a human rights advocacy group. "I think she calculated that she believes she is going to lose some of the Latino vote but gain it through the other votes. She looks at it this way: If they don't vote for me, who are they going to vote for anyway?"

Republican conservatives such as Sen. Karen Johnson, who has criticized Napolitano as soft on immigration, said the speech was "music to my ears."

"The National Guard on the border? Oh, my gosh, hallelujah!" said Johnson, R-Mesa. "I'm one of those people who doesn't care who gets the credit as long as we get the job done."

Not all Hispanics disagreed with Napolitano. Rep. Pete Rios, a longtime Democratic lawmaker, said she hit just the right tone on immigration.

"The issue is that the governor goes far enough to secure the border without alienating the Latino community," said Rios, D-Hayden. "So far, so good. Even when she speaks of law and order, and speaks more like an attorney general, she comes up to the line and doesn't cross it. Many, if not most businesses, need that labor in order to be successful."

Napolitano said further details on her illegal-immigration plans will be provided next week when she releases her budget. When asked about her plan to fine companies who intentionally hire undocumented immigrants, Napolitano responded by saying that she is working with a Democratic lawmaker on legislation.

Republicans respond

Republican lobbyist Stan Barnes called Napolitano's address a "re-election speech" that may shock some of her base Democratic support with her tough talk about securing the border.

"The headline of the speech was her apparent call for troops on the border," Barnes said. "I don't think you would have heard it from the mouth of the governor if she did not know that this was going to be the Number 1 issue with which Republicans were going to attack her. She had to come out tough."

In their response to the speech, Republican lawmakers said they want to see how the governor is going to pay for all her initiatives: teacher pay, all-day kindergarten, border security, tax cuts. They expressed skepticism that she would be able to do so, budget surplus or not.

Republicans also stressed that they thought Napolitano had borrowed their ideas and then added expensive ideas of her own.

"The only thing she hasn't proposed was putting a man on the moon from Arizona. Everything else is in the kitchen sink," said House Speaker Jim Weiers, R-Phoenix.

Still, Napolitano mostly played to her past strengths on Monday, asking to increase spending for her signature full-day kindergarten program, to improve health care by luring more doctors to rural areas, and to make college more affordable by increasing financial aid. She challenged the Republican-controlled Legislature to spend at least \$100 million to provide expand full-day kindergarten to all schools in the state this year instead of by 2009.

"Young minds are hungry for information and develop quickly; the more they learn,

the more they can learn," Napolitano said. "Let's offer voluntary full-day kindergarten to every parent who wants it, and let's do it this year."

Teacher pay raise

John Wright, president of the Arizona Education Association, applauded Napolitano for proposals to increase teacher pay and said the state's strong revenues make a full expansion of all-day kindergarten possible.

"I think this is the year to do it, we have the resources," Wright said of full-day kindergarten. "We have schools that are waiting for it to be their turn. Her education agenda has clearly been well thought out. Whether it's kindergarten or high school, I think she really looks at the whole picture."

Napolitano received the biggest applause of the day when she said, "I offer you this challenge today: Let's give a pay raise to every teacher in Arizona."

She said her budget would increase the base salary of teachers to \$30,000 a year. "Let's give a pay raise to every teacher in Arizona," Napolitano said.

She also wants to expand a "Career Ladder" program that rewards teachers based on student achievement and other areas.

"It's embarrassment that Arizona is 50th in the country in public education," said U.S. Rep. Rick Renzi, R-Ariz., who went to Napolitano's speech. "Any concrete steps we can take to recruit and retain the best and the brightest is something I applaud. The idea of bringing the teacher pay up is a great idea."

Economic outlook

Napolitano is facing the best economic outlook of her tenure, climbing from \$1 billion deficits in her first two years to an expected surplus of \$850 million this year.

She congratulated lawmakers and herself for getting out of the fiscal crisis with few scars and vowed to be prepared for the next downturn. In addition to asking for spending increases for education, Napolitano also said there is enough money for tax cuts, though she made no mention of deep property- and income-tax cuts being pushed by GOP lawmakers.

Napolitano said she will ask Secretary of Defense Donald Rumsfeld to invoke a law allowing the federal government to pay Arizona to station National Guard troops at the border. But she said her plan wouldn't stop immigrants from trying to cross.

"We are going to get real about one of the root causes of this problem. People come here because they want to work and employers here are willing to hire them," Napolitano said. "If we want to stop illegal immigration, we've got to stop the demand."

Staff reporters Amanda J. Crawford and Mary Jo Pitzl contributed to this article.

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