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Roy Romer
Governor

STATE OF THE STATE
COLORADO GOVERNOR ROY ROMER
JANUARY 11, 1996

Greetings.

Let me tell you, we're doing well in Colorado.

Our economy is strong.

We live in one of the most beautiful places on earth.

We are blessed to live in Colorado, and we've worked hard to get where we are. We can be proud of what we've done together.

But we can do better. We cannot rest in our efforts to keep our economy strong.

We can't forget there are cracks in the foundation of our society. Not everyone has a seat at the table.

Here's the central question, for me as Governor, for you as legislators, for the citizens of Colorado: how can we take the good we have and reach higher?

We must return to the basics.

Let me tell you a story. I called an old friend, John Murphy of Durango. We've been friends for 40 years, and John was dying. I wanted to relate to him in a meaningful way, because I knew it might be the last time we ever talked. I wanted him to know that I was thinking of him, wanted to know how he was feeling.

He said to me, "Hey, Roy, I feel good. I feel good about the life I've lived because I feel good about the way I raised my children. Not much else matters when you look back from my perspective."

Now, there are all kinds of ways to judge a society.

But I like John's way. If we raise our children right, everything else will probably fit.

To reach higher, we should commit ourselves – as a people in this community called Colorado – to make Colorado the best place to raise a child.

It's a simple vision. But it's really the focus of my final term as Governor.

How can we make this the best place to raise a child?

Let's start by asking what worries the typical Colorado family.

Parents – trying to raise their children, working one or two or more jobs – ask this:

- is my job going to be there next year?
- can I afford decent housing and health insurance for my family?
- can I keep my family safe?
- will the values I try to instill in my children be overwhelmed by their peers, or what they see on TV?
- can I find child care I can afford, and that I can trust?
- will my kids learn what they need to learn at school?
- can I take care of my parents when they're old and what about when I'm old?

How we – not just government, but as a people -- address these anxieties, these needs, will define the kind of Colorado we will become.

I believe that we must focus ourselves – both as a community called Colorado and as elected officials – on these four challenges:

Let's make the lives of young children our highest priority.

Let's make Colorado schools second to none.

Let's keep Colorado's economy the strongest in the country.

Let's keep Colorado's environment and natural beauty the envy of the world.

If we do these things, then we will realize our vision of becoming the best place to raise a child.

Let's talk about each of these challenges.

EARLY CHILDHOOD

Our first challenge is to make the lives of our young children our highest priority.

Parents have always wanted the best for their children. But think about how much harder it is for parents today. Most of us grew up with family nearby, where neighbors watched out for their own children and for those others. For many, that's no longer a reality.

The challenge of parenting can be overwhelming. Those who need child care worry about the quality of that care. Every parent worries about being able to afford decent health care.

Here's what we can do about these challenges:

1. Bright Beginnings

Colorado has undertaken one of the most exciting and innovative strategies to make this the best place for a child to be born and grow up.

It's called Bright Beginnings.

Bright Beginnings is a non-government, volunteer, community-based effort to provide:

- support for new parents;
- universal access to health care for young children;
- “family-friendly” workplaces;
- more effective support systems for teen parents; and
- quality child care throughout Colorado.

The 55,000 babies born each year in Colorado don't come with instruction books or 1-800 numbers. So Bright Beginnings has launched “Warm Welcome,” an effort to have a trained volunteer from the community visit any new parents who want it within 2 to 3 weeks of the birth of their child. These volunteers will do three things:

- First, provide a check list of what parents are likely to confront during the first year of the baby's life;
- Second, to provide a directory of all the help that is available to them in their community or in their region; and
- Third, offer to mentor the parents, on a totally volunteer basis, if the parents want it.

Think of it: thousands of volunteers from churches and service clubs, as well as at-home moms, retirees, and others giving of themselves to care and nurture the youngest children in their communities.

Already, we have raised almost \$1 million in private funds for this project. I especially want to thank my partners in this effort: Brad Butler, the former chairman of the board of Procter & Gamble; and Senator Tom Norton.

Along with all the other business, community and religious leaders involved in this effort, we believe we *can* make this vision of renewed community support for families and kids a reality.

2. Child Care

In Colorado, most parents work. As a result, over 100,000 children spend 8-10 hours, five days a week, in child care.

And yet, they say most child care centers in Colorado are, at best, mediocre, when rated in terms of programs for kids, safety, teacher training and equipment.

Child care is too costly for too many. Some parents pay up to 23 percent of their incomes for child care, but we still aren't paying our child care workers a living wage.

To help solve this problem, I reached out to business to get some fresh and innovative approaches to the child care challenges.

They've suggested to me that we establish a voluntary child care check-off on the state income tax returns to help improve child care facilities.

They have also recommended changing property tax assessments to allow child care facilities to be taxed at the residential rather than the commercial rate.

They suggested expanding opportunities for pre-school teachers to get training, and to apply quality standards to all child care programs that receive government support.

I'm also interested in their proposal to establish a refundable child care tax credit to provide financial support to working parents who need help paying for child care.

These are all good ideas and they deserve our strong consideration.

Because it is critical to have more businesses involved in solving the child care crisis, this spring I will ask business leaders to join me in a series of summits across the state to explore how the private sector can better respond to the child care needs of their employees.

3. Preschool

In my first term, we established the Colorado Preschool Program, which has grown to serve 6,500 children statewide. We all worked together on this, and we can be proud of what this program has accomplished.

I support expanding this program to a statewide total of 8,500 children. I also support opening the program to three-year-olds as local need dictates.

4. Fatherhood

An alarming number of children are growing up without fathers – 40 percent in Denver. Being a parent is tough, but being a single mom is even tougher. Many do an outstanding job.

But records show that kids without fathers are more likely to live in poverty, to commit violent crimes, become teen parents and leave their own children.

I convened a Task Force on Responsible Fatherhood that will make recommendations I hope you will consider with me. Already, they've suggested that we revamp the cumbersome public assistance program which has fathers paying the state to support their kids.

And they've proposed we re-think our approach to public programs, to the court system and to community resources to make sure we are holding fathers responsible for their children, and not chasing them away.

5. Health Insurance for Kids

Another thing that worries parents is the cost of health insurance for their kids.

As it stands, 150,000 of Colorado's children don't have access to health care because their parents can't afford it. Almost all of those children -- 87 percent -- have at least one parent who is employed. Just think about that.

In a state that enjoys our level of prosperity, that is shameful.

I understand that there is a lot of disagreement in this country about how to solve the health care problem. I'm not here to argue about that.

But can't we at least agree that in Colorado we have a collective moral obligation to hold our children harmless, and to provide each and every one of them with basic health care in the early years?

Can't we at least agree on that?

In my budget, I have set aside \$14 million to begin to deal with this issue -- an amount we certainly can afford this year. I think we can be creative in how we use this money to reach the maximum number of children. We could build upon existing programs -- like the Colorado Child Health Plan -- or we can encourage innovative ideas to spring up in communities.

Representative Ben Clark is sponsoring legislation that supports a tax credit that builds on the insurance infrastructure already in place and gives incentives to businesses to be a part of the solution. I'm open to new ideas and I'm sure that together we can solve this problem.

So, let's commit to one another today that, by the time this legislature adjourns 119 days from now, we will have put ourselves clearly on a path to provide health care to every child in Colorado.

EDUCATION

If we are going to make Colorado the best place to raise a child, our first challenge is to make young children our highest priority.

Our next challenge is to make the schools those kids attend second to none.

Every school day more than 650,000 Colorado kids go off to our public schools. Many spend more time in school than they do with their parents.

And, parents ask:

- Are my kids going to be safe in school?
- Are the values I am trying to teach them going to reinforced, or undermined?
- Are they learning what they need to know to get a good job and be good citizens? Are they being challenged to be all that they can be?
- Why aren't they being asked to do more homework?

We've been on this issue a long time and we know there is no quick fix.

We're making progress, but we're not there yet.

Student Performance/Standards

Fundamentally, what matters most is improving student performance. We were right three years ago, when we directed public schools to set clear high standards for student learning and to make sure students meet those standards. Your leadership on this issue has been important.

We now have model standards in place at the state level. Communities are setting their own standards, and we'll have the first measurement of our progress next year.

Colorado's standards are a model for the nation. They will ensure that our students have the skills and knowledge they need to be successful.

Standards are tools to hold schools accountable. It's kind of like an educational "check-up."

We should now make sure the standards are being met. That means;

- The right kind of assessments;
- Improving teacher training;
- More time spent in the classroom learning;
- More parental involvement.

Business as usual won't get the job done.

2. School Finance

We must be strategic with our K-12 investment.

Specifically, I propose we guarantee school districts an automatic 1 percent increase to help maintain basic quality. That amount -- \$22 million -- won't cover all the increased costs they face from inflation, but it's a start.

I am also proposing that we target *additional* money to encourage specific improvements in the K-12 system. I have proposed \$22 million for schools to lengthen the time a child spends in class.

We must also invest in the quality of teaching in the classroom by making \$10 million available, in a competitive grants process, for school districts that redesign their teacher training programs. That's a strategic investment in "more time, better teaching." Representative Kerns and Senator Matsunaka are sponsoring this legislation.

3. Charter Schools:

We need more innovation and more choices in schools; different students learn in different ways. One of the most promising efforts in this area has been charter schools -- schools that teachers and parents organize and run. We should continue to support and expand charter schools, and a commission that examined these ideas over the summer has a series of recommendations we should adopt.

4. Technology:

We need to do a better job of using technology as a tool to improve student learning. This is one of the most powerful tools we've seen in decades.

Our schools must be interconnected with a broader system to facilitate distant learning. They need the right hardware and the software.

But most of all, we need trained teachers who know how to use this system. And we need parents who also are knowledgeable about technology so that they can assist their students.

I will talk more about technology and telecommunications coordination in a few minutes. But our public schools must be part of any statewide coordination and planning.

5. Discipline

Kids can't learn in a disruptive environment. Together, we've taken steps to bring discipline back to our classrooms.

Before that, we all know that no matter how well we educate our kids, their future will never be what it should be unless they are safe in their neighborhoods.

Over the past few years, we have worked together on the fight against crime. We've banned guns in the hands of kids, and strengthened our criminal laws.

This session, we should maintain our funding for the youth crime prevention initiative. We also are revising the children's code. I support many of the proposed changes.

But I want to be very clear right up front; I will not support ending compulsory education.

And, I challenge you – for the third time in as many years – to create alternative schools for expelled students. We can't throw away kids.

SCHOOL-TO-WORK

We also need to focus on the critical transition between school and getting a job. Last year, I launched the Colorado school-to-work initiative, and asked Lt. Gov. Schoettler to take the lead on this vital and innovative effort.

School-to-work is a community partnership of businesses, schools and community organizations coming together to fundamentally change the way we educate our children. It links a strong curriculum, based on rigorous standards, with career knowledge and experience. It will help kids learn what they need to know to get a good job after graduation.

HIGHER EDUCATION

If this is to be the best place to raise a child, then, in addition to reforming our public schools, we also must improve higher education in the state.

Post-secondary education has become a necessity for many jobs. Our system must continue to be high quality and focused on the evolving needs of the workplace.

1. Quality in Higher Education

I support legislation authored by Senator Meiklejohn that will hold our higher education institutions accountable for quality in both teaching and research. This legislation ensures that our investment in higher education is as effective as possible and it provides students and parents information they need to make better decisions about selecting an institution to prepare them for the future.

2. Technology/ Virtual University

We need to take advantage of the opportunities presented by new technology. I'm excited about a new idea – for students to get the training and credentials now only available in a traditional college or university setting.

I am working with Utah Governor Mike Leavitt and other western governors to create a regional “virtual university.”

This is a new way of educating students using technologies to deliver high quality, cost efficient, flexible, and accountable educational programs. It will give us a way to certify the learning people acquire outside of traditional, campus-based programs. This will not only provide alternate access for those who might not have the opportunity to attend college but will also open up the system to much needed competition.

ECONOMY

If this is to be the best place to raise a child, we must nurture an economy to provide quality jobs that pay wages that support a family.

It's simple. You can't raise a child without a job.

So let's talk now about our third challenge -- keeping Colorado's economy strong so we all can enjoy the good life.

Right now our economy continues to lead the nation.

We have 3.8 percent unemployment. More Coloradans have jobs – more than 2 million of us – than at any time in our history.

But in the new world economy in which we compete, we can't be complacent. We must maintain our economic edge.

That's why we're restructuring our economic development programs to make them more efficient.

That's why we are targeting businesses that provide high quality jobs, such as telecommunications, environmental restoration and others -- jobs that pay good wages.

That's why we are reforming the way government deals with businesses, such as the work the Health Department is doing with business and environmental leaders to make regulation more effective and less intrusive.

And that is why we need to re-examine the enterprise zone program this year. It helped us through tough times, but it clearly needs reform.

These measures will provide a climate for continued success. But we need to do more. We need to make sure that our infrastructure improves people's lives and keeps pace with our economy.

People are stuck in traffic. Too many of our roads are in bad shape -- and there are not enough transportation alternatives for people who want them.

At a minimum, we need to allocate an additional \$100 million from our general fund reserves in each of the next five years to fund highways and other transportation projects.

But even this investment will not be enough. Local communities around the state have identified needs that far outpace our current funding plans.

For that reason, I've appointed a Blue Ribbon Transportation Panel of community leaders statewide to assess transportation and funding alternatives. The specific recommendations will be released to us in February.

We need to find a way to meet these needs, but whatever we do in this process should not take away from our other priorities. That is why I will oppose any effort to reinstate the Noble bill. The general fund looks good now but we don't know what it will look like four years from now.

I don't want to take money away from educating kids to fill our potholes.

We also must continue to focus on our air and rail transportation systems, both of which are undergoing enormous change.

But infrastructure is not just highways, rail and air.

It's also the infrastructure of the future – telecommunications - and we need to maintain our position as a world leader.

Technology and telecommunications will continue to dramatically impact how we live, work and educate our citizens. Last year, we passed legislation to open the local exchange telephone market to competition. This year, we need to work together with the Public Utilities Commission to implement those changes.

It is also important to improve coordination and planning of state technology and telecommunications purchases. This will ensure we have systems that interconnect and realize the benefits of economies of scale.

I've asked Andre Pettigrew, the director of General Support Services to lead this effort. And I will not approve appropriations for technology and telecommunications for any department that are not part of this coordinated effort.

We've made great progress in our economy.

But we need to recognize that economic growth does not benefit all people or regions of our state equally. Some are still waiting for the benefits of growth, while others may feel they've had enough.

If we are going to make this the best place to raise a child, we need to ensure that the benefits of growth are shared by all Coloradans. As part of our economic agenda, we need to focus on issues like affordable housing, transportation, workforce training, sustainable agriculture, and better targeting of our incentives.

GROWTH AND THE ENVIRONMENT

The growth we have experienced in recent years has us nearly busting at the seams in many areas, and Coloradans are genuinely concerned about whether we are going to be able to preserve our open spaces, keep our air clean, protect our wildlife, and preserve the uniqueness of our different communities and regions.

And that leads to our final challenge, which is how to keep Colorado's environment and our natural beauty the envy of the world.

We will never do right by our children if we do not preserve the beauty of this place.

Colorado is unique in so many ways. We often forget how blessed we are. From our farms to our mountains, to our rivers, to our valleys, this is truly one of the most beautiful places on earth. We have a sacred obligation – to ourselves, to our children and to future generations not to lose that.

Last year at this time, we started the Smart Growth and Development initiative -- to go to Colorado's communities to identify specific and effective ways to make growth work for us, not against us. We have focused on an agenda that has been driven by citizens from the bottom up, not the top down -- from the community level and not the state level.

Thousands of Coloradans have participated in this process to better their communities. We need to keep faith with those citizens, we need to take their recommendations seriously, and we need to act on them this session.

The recommendations cover dozens of important issues from economic development to education to transportation to agriculture to the environment and provide a road map of how we can maintain our high quality of life in Colorado. I've already discussed many of these issues today.

I want to highlight two of these recommendations:

First, we need to give counties better tools to address land-use issues. If we're serious about giving local communities greater ability to grow smart, we need to change the so-called 35-acre rule, which restricts a community's ability to manage its growth effectively. Through this Smart Growth process, citizens have developed a balanced set of suggestions, and I urge you to act on them.

Second, we need to reform the structure and mission of the State Land Board so it responds to a broader set of community values. The Land Board manages 3 million acres of state land. Because of its narrow constitutional mandate to manage these lands for "maximum" revenue, the Land Board's actions too often conflict with local plans and priorities.

Allowing the Land Board more flexibility will require a change to the state Constitution, and you should act to refer such a measure to voters.

There are other challenges in the environment. We have made great progress to clean up the air. Twenty years ago, for instance, the metro area

violated the federal standard for carbon monoxide over a 100 times a year. Now, it's only one or two times a year, and the trend continues downward. This year, for the first time since federal air quality standards were set, we will be in compliance with the standard for ozone.

What we have done has worked and we cannot afford to reverse course. We must demand that the programs work effectively and efficiently. But it is not too much to ask our metro area drivers to have their cars inspected once every two years to make sure they don't pollute our air.

And we need to continue to support locally driven efforts to clean up the Brown Cloud in the Denver area – not because the federal government tells us to do it, but because it's the right thing to do.

I'm also very excited about the partnerships – with the help of Great Outdoors Colorado -- to preserve open spaces in the Yampa Valley and elsewhere throughout Colorado.

Federal Government

I said we should make Colorado the best place to raise a child. And I talked about our four key challenges.

We should make the lives of young children our highest priority.

We must build the best education system.

We must maintain the strongest economy.

We must keep our environment and natural beauty the envy of the world.

We know how to do this. We have worked on this agenda together, and we need to continue that work.

But there is another challenge I want to mention today; what changes in the federal government will mean for Colorado.

The budget debate is critical to Colorado and our nation's future, but it is characterized by gridlock and partisanship.

We don't yet know the final result of this budget debate, particularly in the areas of Medicaid and welfare reform.

But it is likely we will be handed more responsibilities and fewer resources.

We will have to decide what, as a state government, we can pay for, and what will have to be taken care of by individuals and communities.

We shouldn't kid ourselves. It won't be easy. And, it won't be done quickly.

I can't predict what is going to happen in Washington or when. But we should continue the welfare reforms we began two years in Colorado, and we should continue to force efficiencies in Medicaid through managed care.

Let me put this on the table. Any decisions on reappropriations of federal funds for Medicaid and welfare ought to be done jointly by both the executive and legislative branches.

And, whatever changes we face in Medicaid and welfare, we must not make up lost federal dollars by sacrificing the education of our children.

Nor can we allow ourselves to be paralyzed by the uncertainty in Washington, and be drawn off our own Colorado priorities.

CONCLUSION

Let me tell you a story. I've been working over the last few weeks with three Republican governors and two Democratic governors on one of the toughest issues in the federal budget debate -- Medicaid.

We met last Friday and made substantial progress. Not total; don't know if it will hold together; but we made substantial progress.

The key to our progress so far is that we trust each other. We have honest differences, but we are trying to stand in each other's shoes, trying to find common ground.

By common ground, I don't just mean coming half way between two opposite positions. I mean continuing to push our minds so that we can discover a true common purpose that's a win for both sides. And more importantly, a win for those who depend upon us to solve the problem.

There is a lesson in this. As we do our work in Colorado, whether as executive or legislators, Republican or Democrat, rural or urban, we need

to understand that there is a community interest, a common good that we all have to find.

We have to decide what is most important to us – our ideology, or our community.

If our *ideology* is most important to each of us, then chances are we won't trust one another enough to solve our problems and we'll end up destroying our community.

But if our *community* is most important to each of us, then we will find a way to work together and to trust each other enough to solve our problems.

Our ideology will guide us, but it won't control us. In the end, it's the community – our community – that must come first.

This is what our job is. This is what we mean when we talk about restoring trust in our institutions, civility to our public discussion.

Part of this is to honor the diversity of our people – their lives, their heritage, their cultures.

We need to get away from the narrow public debate about who “real Americans” are, and focus instead on a debate about what America’s real problems are.

We ought not focus on what separates us, but on what unites us.

What ought to unite us is making this the best place to raise a child.