

JOHN BEL EDWARDS

(/)

OFFICE *of the* GOVERNOR

Gov. Edwards' 2022 Regular Session Remarks

March 14, 2022

As prepared for delivery.

Thank you, Bishop Duca, for that beautiful prayer.

All too often, our world is filled with unrest, and right now our prayers are especially with the people of Ukraine as they defend their homes, their families, and their freedom.

We are joined today by Eddy Hayes who is the Honorary Consul of Ukraine. He represents the economic and cultural interests of the country here in Louisiana. I asked him to be here today in hopes that he will relay our unified support to his colleagues in Ukraine. Eddy, will you stand to be recognized?

Mr. Speaker, Mr. President, members of the Legislature and my fellow Louisianans.

It is an honor to be back in this chamber after delivering last year's speech offsite due to COVID.

We've been through a lot over these past two years, navigating the pandemic and multiple natural disasters. I've always been one to count my blessings, but now I cherish the time spent with loved ones even more— especially my children – Samantha Bel, Sarah Ellen, and John Miller. My beautiful wife and my best friend, Donna.

Like me, I know that many of you have sacrificed seeing loved ones in order to keep them safe. And unfortunately, we've all lost people dear to us because of COVID-19. We've lost people who should be in this room with us now.

It was exactly two years ago today that we marked the first death from COVID-19 in Louisiana. Since then, over 16,800 Louisianans have died, and more than 1.2 million cases have been confirmed.

But a lot has changed. We have safe and effective vaccines that are saving countless lives. We have better therapeutic treatments. High-quality masks are now a practical option for families.

Cases and hospitalizations have been steadily dropping since we emerged from the Omicron fueled surge this winter.

Parades rolled again this Mardi Gras. If that's not a Louisiana breeze of hope, I don't know what is.

On March 11, 2020 I signed a public health emergency for COVID-19. And while it changed to reflect the ebb and flow of the pandemic, it has remained in effect since then. This Wednesday, the order expires. And after 24 months, I will not be renewing it.

This decision was certainly not made lightly. I have met with the Division of Administration, GOHSEP, the Department of Health, and the Louisiana National Guard to ensure that there will be no federal aid repercussions or other adverse consequences from not renewing the proclamation.

Just because the proclamation is expiring doesn't mean COVID is over. If the circumstances call for it, I will not hesitate to declare another emergency. But God willing, we will never have to see such difficult mitigation measures in our state again.

I don't know what the future holds, but I do know that we are in a much better place today than we were two years ago.

That is in large part due to healthcare heroes around the state and the stalwart team at the Louisiana Department of Health, including State Health Officer Dr. Joe Kanter and Secretary Dr. Courtney Phillips. They may be weary, but they have not wavered in their efforts to save lives.

We are ALSO in a much better place today than we were six years ago. At my first state of the state, I had just inherited a billion-dollar budget deficit to close out that fiscal year, and a two-billion-dollar deficit for the year that started July 1, 2016.

Today, as I stand here before you, we have hundreds of millions in surplus, even more in current year excess, and billions in federal funding through the American Rescue Plan and the Infrastructure Investment and Jobs Act.

It all adds up to a historic opportunity to transform our state through pivotal investments in every level of education, infrastructure projects that for decades have been pipe dreams, long overdue pay raises for some of our most dedicated workers, and combating the effects of climate change.

We have a once in a generation opportunity to shape our future, and we must take advantage of it. It is not an exaggeration to say that the choices that will be made this session over these next three months will have a lasting legacy for the state. We have to get this right.

Shaping the future always, always begins with education. So the budget I have proposed includes:

\$31.7 million for faculty pay raises in higher education.

\$10.5 million for the MJ Foster Promise Program Fund, created by President Cortez just last year.

\$97.2 million for higher education, which includes \$5 million for Title IX offices across the state, \$15 million increase in GO Grants, and \$25 million into the Higher Education Initiatives fund.

\$43.4 million for early childhood education, including more than \$17 million for the LA-4 Early Childhood program.

And \$148.4 million for teacher and support staff pay raises, which is at least a \$1,500 raise for teachers and \$750 for support staff. This also would be the fifth teacher pay raise since I've been Governor.

However, I believe that working together during this session, we can do even better.

And that's why I am recommending that the first \$50 million of any increase in the revenue forecast that the REC may recognize before the budget is passed go to increasing teacher raises to \$2,000. It is the least we can do for the people who never gave up on our students despite unprecedented circumstances, and it continues our goal of getting teacher pay up to at least the Southern Regional Average.

My budget also includes a \$12 per diem increase for intermediate care facilities for people living with intellectual disabilities. The funding will be used to support Direct Service Workers in the medical field. Unfortunately, turnover in this field is high – especially over the past two years because of COVID. The pay is unacceptably low and the work is difficult.

But that hasn't stopped Sheliaka Harvey who is a certified health manager and direct service worker at Terrebone Arc in Houma. She is here with us today. Sheliaka helps take care of 6 women – cooking, cleaning, making sure they take their prescribed medications and providing companionship, which can be just as important as medical assistance. Sheliaka says she cares for the residents as if they are her own family and seeing them smile makes her day. Please, Ms. Sheliaka, stand so the Chamber can welcome you.

There are many other direct support workers like Sheliaka who understand how important their jobs are and want to stay in them. But at the end of the day, they have to be able to pay their bills. They deserve so much more than this modest raise, but I hope it can be a step towards change.

We are also including a \$100 per month supplemental pay increase for eligible first responders, which includes law enforcement officers and firefighters. Here in Louisiana, we need to put to rest this talk about defunding the police.

We can never adequately compensate the men and women who put their lives on the line for public safety. However, it is important that we have the ability to recruit, train, and retain the best of the best in law enforcement. They deserve it. And the public deserves it.

The items I've mentioned so far are recurring expenditures. Thus no one-time dollars are proposed to fund these investments.

But we also have a momentous opportunity this year to commit one-time dollars to one-time expenses. Most notably, we are going to invest in infrastructure unlike any time in our history. Roads, bridges, ports, railways, water and sewage systems, orphan wells, broadband...They all need our attention, and with funds from the Infrastructure Investment and Jobs Act, the American Rescue Plan, and our normal Capital Outlay program, we will make meaningful progress on Mega-projects and deferred maintenance projects that have been sitting on a shelf for decades. The longer it takes, the more expensive they become and the more citizens lose confidence in their elected leadership.

My proposal includes more than \$1.1 billion in funding for critical infrastructure, such as \$500 million for a new Mississippi River Bridge here in Baton Rouge, an additional \$100 million for the bridge in Lake Charles and \$500 million for water and sewer improvements statewide.

These dollars are being strategically placed to best leverage federal dollars for Louisiana.

We are all tired of the jokes about knowing you've entered Louisiana when the roads get bad. Every state is struggling to update their infrastructure. And since becoming governor, we've invested nearly \$4.7 billion in projects, including 6,312 miles of our highways, in order to change that narrative. We've made significant progress, but the funds we are receiving from the federal government will allow us to catapult big ticket projects from talk to action.

My budget proposal also dedicates \$550 million in federal American Rescue Plan funding to replenish Louisiana's Unemployment Insurance Trust Fund, which had been funded at historically high levels prior to the pandemic. We didn't just pull this number out of the air. That's what's going to be required to meet the solvency goal by September that we have in state law.

Some folks may ask why this is a priority. Our businesses are still recovering from the pandemic. If we don't replenish the trust fund, it will automatically trigger an increase in taxes on all businesses in the state – big and small, which pay into the trust fund. That is the last thing they need right now.

This is a balanced budget that is responsible, transformational, and continues my administration's practice of only using one-time dollars for one-time expenses. It's a promise I made six years ago and one that I have not deviated from. We are not going back to the days of deficits, fiscal cliffs and one-time dollars for recurring expenditures. And we will continue to be focused on empowering families and communities for the future.

It's also with a focus on the future that we are working to eliminate the digital divide – a goal I have set to accomplish by 2029.

In this day and age, internet is something most of us take for granted. But there are too many Louisianans, especially in rural communities, who still don't have access, can't afford it, or lack digital literacy.

A strong internet structure is essential to economic competitiveness, access to healthcare, educational opportunities, and an overall better quality of life.

That's why my administration worked closely with Rep. Deshotel last year to create the Granting Unserved Municipalities Broadband Opportunities grant program, or GUMBO for short. This program, totaling hundreds of millions of dollars, will provide grants to facilitate the deployment of broadband infrastructure, connecting more than 471,000 unserved residents in our state. And we're just getting started.

The rest of my legislative package is also about transforming our future for the people of our state.

That includes ensuring that the citizens of this state are fairly represented. We just ended the redistricting session, an opportunity that only comes once every decade. As I've often said: the voters should be choosing their leaders; leaders should not be picking and choosing their voters. Partisanship and self-interest cannot rule the day. Voting is one of the most important and cherished rights and responsibilities of ALL Americans.

It is disappointing and unfortunate, in my view, that the end result of the special session did not reflect what is right and fair and what is required by the Voting Rights Act.

The current demographic makeup of our state shows that the percentage of African American population has grown over the last 10 years and yet, while numerous maps were filed reflecting this growth, none of these maps made it to my desk. The most egregious in my view is the Congressional map because there are half as many majority minority districts as the law, basic fairness and I believe basic math require. Therefore, I vetoed the Congressional bill.

You know, the Legislature undertook 5 separate redistricting efforts. A total of 163 districts. And across those 5 bills and 163 districts there's not one net new majority Black district anywhere. The African American voting age population in this state is 31.2 percent, basically a third of our population. And it's likely more because according to a recent report by the U.S. Census Bureau, the Black population was undercounted. And I don't believe we should need a court to tell us how to do basic math: One third of six is two.

Our children are watching us. In fact, many took part in the process to make their voices heard, pleading that the right thing be done. We must think beyond ourselves and focus on their future, the future of our state, and the place they want to continue to call home.

Having personally witnessed redistricting twice now, I can say that the current process is not working. That is why I am supporting legislation to establish an independent redistricting commission to support the Legislature in reapportionment for future redistricting. 18 other states have some type of commission, and I think we should be the 19th.

Now, if you don't agree with this, if you think the current process is sufficient, then prove me wrong. Pass a map this session that accurately reflects the current demographic makeup of our state for Congress.

I mentioned earlier the proposed increase in supplemental pay for law enforcement officers, something that I believe is important to attract and retain the people who are keeping us safe. But an important part of that effort needs to be ensuring that those officers can be true partners with our communities and have the trust of the public. And let me be clear, the overwhelming majority of our law enforcement officers are professionals and excellent public servants who work hard every day to protect and serve. We know that we need to do more to hold the very few officers who violate that trust accountable. I intend to support several bills in this session that will do just that – including a package bill that would clarify the criminal law of malfeasance in office to apply to violations of constitutional civil rights and to provide for revocation of POST certification if an officer is found to have committed such an offense. I know these discussions are difficult, but they are necessary.

Another system that is broken is the way our citizens are treated in the aftermath of a natural disaster, which unfortunately here in Louisiana happens way too often.

The federal government still hasn't allocated sufficient funds for Louisiana to recover from Hurricanes Laura, Delta, and Ida. And – while I probably should not say this since I know that my Mamma's watching - it's a damn shame that they haven't. When I talk to people in DC, they tell me that more aid is coming, and I believe it will ... but I don't blame folks for feeling like they've been left behind.

Let's be clear though - it's not just a federal problem.

Recent disasters have exposed the unacceptable ways our neighbors are being taken advantage of when they are at their most vulnerable.

Suffering damage due to a natural disaster is life altering. And yet, there are landlords who have used it as an opportunity for a cash grab.

So I am supporting legislation by Rep. Landry that has bipartisan support and emulates that of other Southern conservative states that will strengthen tenant protections in the aftermath of a disaster. Many of the reported evictions after Laura and Ida were illegal. But there are no meaningful repercussions to discourage landlords from proceeding with wrongful evictions. We're going to change that. We all know what it's like to have to make the difficult decision to temporarily leave our homes because of a storm. Imagine being evicted simply because you chose to keep your family safe.

It's also unacceptable that many residents are more scared of their insurance companies than the storm itself.

Kerry Anderson has a beautiful historic home in Lake Charles that was destroyed by Hurricanes Laura and Delta. After 18 months, she is still battling her insurance company to force them to pay even a fraction of what she is owed. Kerry is also a breast cancer patient. Her sole focus right now should be on fighting cancer, not fighting with her insurance company.

In Southeast Louisiana, Peggy Honore, who teaches at LSU's School of Public Health, had FIVE insurance adjusters in just the first twelve weeks after Ida destroyed her home in Destrehan. How is that even remotely possible or acceptable?

Unfortunately, Kerry and Peggy are far from the only ones left in insurance purgatory. There are thousands of other families and business owners as well who have been left in the lurch.

Pat's of Henderson is an iconic seafood restaurant that opened its doors in Lake Charles in 1977. I can tell you from personal experience - the food is very good. The day after Hurricane Laura made landfall, owner Nick Perioux hired a contractor so that he could get the restaurant back up and running as soon as possible. Instead, he struggled with his insurance company until November of last year. Had his payments been made on time, the restaurant would've reopened by the end of 2020. Instead, it's slated to reopen this June, nearly two years after the storm. And I can't wait to go back when it does.

Vineyard Christian Fellowship Church of Lake Charles has endured a similar story. Co-Pastor George Rodrigues wasn't able to get the insurance benefit the church was entitled to until last summer. In the meantime, worship service was held in their outdoor pavilion in the sweltering Louisiana heat. The church's facilities still aren't back to 100%.

Kerry, Peggy, Nick, and Pastor George will you all please stand to be recognized.

Ladies and gentlemen, we have got to hold insurance companies more accountable.

My legislative package includes a number of bills focused on hurricane deductibles, claim transparency, enforcing insurance fraud laws against bad actors, revamping the adjuster registry so that policyholders can verify their adjusters, and stopping mortgage companies from withholding insurance money from homeowners without good reason.

I'm not limiting my support to only the bills in my own package, however. Many bills of a similar nature have been filed this session, which signals how much of a problem this is. I look forward to working with all of you on what should be a bipartisan issue.

Insurance is a wonderful thing - when it functions as intended. Unfortunately, companies don't always work in good faith with homeowners. All we're asking is that they play by the rules.

We are all having to adapt to a changing environment - one where storms are getting stronger and more frequent.

We don't get to dictate when the next storm hits or how bad it's going to be. But we can work to mitigate the impacts of climate change.

That's why I established the Climate Initiatives Task Force and set a goal of reaching net zero by 2050. This taskforce, which includes scientists, academics, industry leaders and environmentalists, has adopted a Statewide Climate Action Plan.

What makes Louisiana's plan special, and the most attainable in my opinion, is that instead of working against oil and gas companies, we are working with them. In this state, that will look like offshore oil platforms and wind turbines side by side. In fact, many oil companies have already pledged to reach similar net zero goals.

Additionally, combating climate change is just as much about economic development as it is about anything else.

Some of our biggest economic development projects recently have been with companies focused on clean energy. Grön fuels is planning a \$9.2 billion renewable fuel investment in West Baton Rouge Parish, Air Products plans to build a \$4.5 billion blue hydrogen facility in Ascension Parish, there is a \$1.1 billion expansion of a green diesel plant in Norco in St. Charles Parish, and the Shell Convent refinery too may get a second life making low-carbon fuels.

In North Louisiana in Caldwell Parish, we announced plans for Louisiana Green Fuels, a \$700 million renewable diesel refinery.

It all adds up to more than a thousand permanent jobs and thousands of construction jobs.

If you think that clean energy doesn't equal jobs, you couldn't be more wrong. Just two weeks ago, the first offshore wind lease sale in New York brought in more than \$4.3 BILLION. That's BILLION, with a B. It's estimated those wind leases will power millions of homes.

We're scheduled to have the first ever wind lease sale of the Gulf Coast early next year. And as we can see from legislation filed by Rep. Zeringue and Rep. Orgeron, there's strong interest in wind energy development on both sides of the aisle.

There's strong interest in wind energy development in Louisiana waters from stakeholders also.

This is the future I've been talking about harnessing. And we can either get on board or get left behind.

Ultimately, our motivation for advancing clean energy should be preserving the land we are so very blessed to call home so that Louisiana will not be washed away.

Finally, I can't leave this podium without yet again making a plea for you to do the right thing and raise the minimum wage and reduce the gender pay gap.

There is not a person in this room who can tell me with a straight face that \$7.25, a minimum wage from 13 years ago, is fair or acceptable, especially given the current rate of inflation. 21 other states have increased their minimum wage, including Arkansas and Florida. And yet, every year, efforts to raise the minimum wage in Louisiana, even modestly or gradually, fail.

Our workers and families deserve better.

And so do women. I am also supporting legislation to enact pay transparency. It isn't a silver bullet solution, but it's a sensible measure that can make a meaningful difference in reducing the gender pay gap, and that too will benefit the families that need it most.

So let's make this the session we finally take action on the issues that matter most to the people of Louisiana.

Some of the bills being brought up this session do nothing to make lives better. Nothing to continue moving us forward. They only serve to divide us. And frankly, some are reminiscent of a dark past that we should learn from, not relive.

You know the old saying "if these walls could talk"? Well, these walls DO talk. History remembers what happens in this building. And the issues we spend the most time on signal to the public what we value the most.

So I ask: What do you value most? More importantly, WHO do you value most?

As I think you all know, my faith is very important to me. It is the foundation that guides me as I strive every day to become a better leader and a better person. Growing up, I believe I had the hardest catechism teacher there was...my mom. Those lessons have stayed with me. And as I contemplate the work I want us to accomplish together in the last two years of this term, I'm drawn to Christ's Sermon on the Mount and the Beatitudes.

You all know them, but here are a few of my favorites...

Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven.

Blessed are those who mourn, for they shall be comforted.

Blessed are the meek, for they shall inherit the earth.

Blessed are the merciful, for they shall obtain mercy.

Blessed are the pure in heart, for they shall see God.

As we enter this session, as you consider the many issues that will be discussed from this very spot, I want you to really reflect on the people of this great state. Our neighbors, as their spirits are broken and they mourn two years of loss and hardships. Our children, with their meek and pure hearts. Our moms, the most merciful and blessed of all.

Our time in office is fleeting, but the decisions we make while here will last generations. I'm asking that we use this time wisely.

I'll leave you with my favorite:

Blessed are the peacemakers, for they shall be called children of God.

In a world that has too much hatred, strife, and currently war, let us be peacemakers.

May God bless you and may God bless the great state of Louisiana.

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