

## *Manchin pushes alternative energy, longer school year*

*By Erica Peterson/Scott Finn*

Wednesday night, Gov. Joe Manchin gave the first State of the State address of his second term.

He has big goals in energy, health care and education, but the economic recession is forcing him to scale some of them back.

Manchin reminded the audience that West Virginia is one of the only four states in the nation not facing a budget deficit.

But he said tougher times are ahead.

“While we are in better financial shape than our neighbors, West Virginia is not immune to the national and global economy,” he said.

Manchin says there will be no across-the-board pay raises for state and school employees this year.

Instead, he is proposing a one-time bonus payment of up to 3% -- but only if the state has a surplus at the end of this fiscal year.

Right now, the state government is running a small surplus, but it’s disappearing quickly.

In two years, the Manchin Administration is projecting the state to be \$243 million in the red.

Manchin also talked up “green energy.” Right now, 99 percent of the electricity sold in the state comes from coal.

By 2015, he wants at least 10 percent generated by alternative or renewable sources.

The plan would also provide unspecified incentives for the development of alternative energies.

“With the growth of wind technology, by recycling waste heat from our industrial facilities, by cultivating biofuels like switchgrass, by harnessing the power of our rivers and the sun, and by expanding our clean coal efforts, we can meet our energy needs, create new jobs and improve our environment at the same time,” he said.

Manchin is including “clean coal” technology in his alternative fuel plan. But for clean coal to work, carbon dioxide from power plants has to be stored underground.

Carbon sequestration is relatively untested on a large scale, but Manchin wants to clear the way for its use in West Virginia.

“This week, I will present a bill that will allow for permits for carbon sequestration projects,” he said.

“It will establish regulations for monitoring carbon sequestration sites and clarify ownership of the space in which the carbon is stored.”

In his education proposals, Manchin delved into what has been a controversial issue in the past – the length of the school year.

State law requires the school year to begin and end on certain days. With snow days, some counties end up several days short of the state-mandated 180 days of instruction.

“So tonight, I’m presenting a simple fix that will help ensure that students receive 180 days of instruction by extending the school calendar on both ends,” he said.

“This bill will require county school systems to begin the instructional term five days earlier and will give schools the flexibility to extend the calendar if necessary to meet the 180-day requirement.”

Another bill requires third and eighth grade students to meet certain state standards – or be held back. Manchin is promising to help struggling students in new after-school and summer school programs.

“We can no longer allow children who do not have the critical skill sets they require to advance to the next level,” he said.

“It is unfair to their parents, it is unfair to their classmates and, most of all, it is unfair to them.”

Manchin also announced plans to allow veterans from all over the country to attend West Virginia public universities at in-state tuition rates.

He also said he intends to improve access health care. He said he wants to provide dental equipment to primary care clinics.

And he wants to open the Medicaid program to adults making up to 50 percent of the poverty level. To do this, he says he is may be willing to hike the state’s cigarette tax.

“This is such an important step toward addressing our state’s growing healthcare concerns and unmanaged healthcare costs that, if necessary in the future, I will propose an increase in our state’s cigarette tax to pay for its continuation,” he said.

Delegate Harry Keith White, D-Mingo, chair of the House Finance Committee, said some of the more ambitious plans the governor mentioned may be harder than expected.

“With the economy that we have right now, I noticed two, three proposals that he talked about in there, but I didn’t hear any funding mechanism for some of them. I’m sure that’s what we’ll have to try to come up with,” White said.

Senate President Earl Ray Tomblin, D-Logan, said he thought Manchin’s speech was realistic. His constituents in the coalfields depend on the coal industry, but he believes more attention can be paid to the environment.

“Obviously, we would like to see coal used in an environmentally-friendly way,” Tomblin said.

“Seems like every time there’s a shortage of gasoline or petroleum, that we always talk about it but we never follow up once that shortage is gone. I would hope that with the governor’s initiatives and the proposals he has that we could be serious this time, come up with the kind of plans it would take to convert coal to clean energy out there,” Tomblin said.

Four years ago, Manchin laid out big goals in his first state of the state address. A big budget surplus allowed him to raise salaries, cut taxes and pay down state debts.

Manchin has big plans for his second term -- health care for all West Virginians and more tax cuts.

But with the recession starting to hit West Virginia, he’s been forced to scale back his proposals – and rely on WVU quarterback Pat White to generate the most excitement of the evening.

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