

Sanford touts reforms

Governor speaks on restructuring, tax cuts

By Zane Wilson - The Sun News
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COLUMBIA --Tying his reform proposals to competitiveness, Gov. Mark Sanford said Wednesday in his annual State of the State address that he wants to work with legislators and hopes they can put aside their past differences with him on policy.

"I look forward to the things we can do this year," Sanford said.

In his sixth State of the State speech, the governor echoed many of the positions he has taken during his campaign and each year since, such as government restructuring and tax cuts.

He did not speak to the coast this year, as he has usually done in the past by referring to tourism's spot as the state's top industry. Local legislators said they were disappointed.

"I was amazed he did not mention beach renourishment or roads," said Sen. Dick Elliott, D-North Myrtle Beach.

But he said Sanford was "on target with a lot of his remarks," especially about preserving land for the future and keeping government growth at a level consistent with income growth of taxpayers.

Rep. Thad Viers, R-Myrtle Beach, said he hoped to hear Sanford reiterate his support for Interstate 73, which is planned as Horry County's first interstate highway link.

Because Sanford was emphasizing economic development and competitiveness, "you could not leave I-73 out of that discussion," Viers said.

Still, he said he agrees with Sanford that state spending must be brought under control.

On conservation, Sanford called for a one-time \$50 million allocation to buy land the timber companies are selling. The current real estate slowdown makes purchases of such land even more economical, Sanford said.

He said the possibility of \$50 million worth of new conservation land is a once-in-a-lifetime opportunity that should not be passed up. The land would help the state be more competitive because it is a quality of life item, he said.

As for spending, he has been a constant critic of the growth in spending but said in his speech that he believes a recession is coming, despite predictions of the state's economist.

"We have to get serious about state spending," he said. The economy may force that this year, where in the past some legislators have seen his stance on spending as a philosophical debate, he added.

He again called for tougher driving under the influence laws, saying the carnage on the roads is intolerable and is another quality of life issue.

"I look for a change on this front in the first 30 days of this session," he said.

He also pushed again for government restructuring, especially bringing an end to the Budget and Control Board that makes decisions governors in the other states make.

He is a member of the board, but so are two lawmakers, the treasurer and comptroller.

"We don't believe we can compete in today's world with the government structure that is in place," Sanford said, drawing one of only a few rounds of applause he received during his 50-minute speech.

He called the board an "insane model" of government and asked lawmakers to put it to the public for a vote.

"Not for me," because he would probably be out of office before a change could be put in place, but for the next governor.

"Let the governor actually administer the law," Sanford said.

He turned to the television cameras and asked residents who might be watching to call their lawmakers "and ask that they insist on a change in our government structure."

The government operates on an 1895 constitution that was aimed at keeping blacks out of government, and that system should be brought to an end, he said.

"This is the plantation model of, we know what's best for y'all," Sanford said.

He said a small-business health insurance plan, consolidating school districts and more movement toward school choice such as offering scholarships for children in failing schools are all things that can be done this session.

The Commerce Department will soon come out with an economic development policy that will offer a new way of thinking on the subject, he said. And in a similar vein, he said he will appoint a land use planning task force to look at ways to prevent urban sprawl.

House Minority Leader Harry Ott, D-Matthews, spoke for the Democrats afterward, saying they are ready to work with Sanford on the cigarette tax increase he supports, but want the revenue used to provide health insurance for people who can't afford it.

Sanford wants the money to be used to cut income taxes.

Sen. Hugh Leatherman, R-Florence and chairman of the Senate Finance Committee, came under criticism for leading the spending binge, He said afterward that he differs with Sanford on how money should be spent.

But Leatherman, a member of the Budget and Control Board, said he and Sen. Glenn McConnell, R-Charleston and leader of the Senate, are working on legislation to reform the board.

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