



Oregon State Archives

800 Summer Street NE

Salem, OR 97310

503-373-0701 ext. 1

sos.oregon.gov/archives

GOVERNOR JOHN A. KITZHABER ADMINISTRATION

Legislative Message, 1997

Source: Legislative Address Governor, John A. Kitzhaber, Oregon, 1997

A year ago when I delivered my first state of the state speech, I was fairly new to his job. But every day I learn more, and I can say that the experiences of the past year have shed new light on the state of the state – and on the mood of its citizens.

Through wisdom, fire and flood – I have had the opportunity to witness firsthand the courage, the selflessness and the deep sense of community that still permeates this state of ours. And my heart goes out to those in Keizer, Ashland, Talent, on Sauvie Island – who are even now struggling to recover from the recent flood.

You know, if I ask Oregonians – and I have – about how they veil their state, about why they love this place and why they are proud to be Oregonians, they will always come back to quality of life.

In many ways that is a vague term because it means something different to everyone.

For some it is standing on the beach watching the sunset. For others it is standing on a mountain watching the sunrise. For some it is not being help up in the traffic and for others it is being in a state that is on the cutting edge of high technology. For some it is good schools and for others it is the ability to still work the land as ranchers, loggers or fishermen.

It is what Governor Tom McCall spoke of as the “Oregon mystique.”

It has something to do with the place itself – its natural beauty, its abundance of natural resources, its variety of landscape

It has something to do with us – our reverence for the land and open spaces that makes us skeptical of truth even while we welcome prosperity.

Whatever it is, whatever its components, Oregon has some quality that we cannot define but that we all recognize. It’s why we’re here. It’s why we chose to come. It’s why we choose to stay.

But when I talk to people around the state today, they are afraid – there is a lot of anxiety out there, a lot of uncertainty because the world is changing – their lives are filled with change. They perceive that they are losing something; that their q quality of life – however they define it – is at risk and that they have little control over it.

I feel it. We all feel it in ways large and small.

The change from a natural resource-based economy to a high tech, information-based economy. A global marketplace. The growing number of people who are under-employed – and people with good jobs who don't know how long they will have them because of the changes taking place around them. The plight of the salmon. Traffic congestion. Concern over the educational system.

Whatever it is, our lives are filled with change and something important is at risk.

My goal – our common goal – is to keep Oregon's special quality of life, in all its different forms – to preserve it in the midst of the change happening around us and to us.

Today, I want to share with you what I believe we must do to accomplish that. I will focus on three areas? Education, transportation and natural resources. And I need your help because we collectively have to think a little differently about these problems than we have in the past.

This is more than the traditional debate about changing government – it is also about changing us. And I tell you with all certainty that unless we begin to do things differently, we will lose that quality of place that makes Oregon so special.

We will wake up a decade hence, wondering what happened to our universities, to our high schools and to our grade schools; wondering how it was that good roads became bad roads and how easy commutes became traffic jams. We will wake up asking, "How did we let the salmon become extinct?"

This is not the future we want, nor one we need to accept. But we will need to innovate. We will need to be creative – and bold. We will need to approach old problems with new ideas, and new problems with flexibility and an open mind.

Quite literally, we will need to blaze a new trail.

Everyone knows that part of the change I am suggesting will require more money in all these areas. But I cannot stress strongly enough that if we are to keep Oregon's quality of life, money alone will not solve the problem. We must fundamentally change the way we think and the way we do business.

That is the challenge I lay before you today: Can we change and adapt to meet the demands of growth? I believe we can. I believe we must.

I have been accused of being a policy wonk. I stand before you guilty as charged.

But I also want to tell you that schools, roads and a healthy environment are more than just public policy issues for me. I love this state.

I was educated in Oregon's schools; my nieces and nephews are in Oregon schools today.

I learned to drive on Oregon roads and like all of you I still rely on them to get where I need to go.

And I can't imagine my life without access to our rivers, mountains, beaches and deserts. But today thousands of Oregon children, including my nephews, attend schools where the quality of the educational program is threatened by budget shortfalls. Today, traffic jams are become commonplace – not just in Portland but in Bend, Medford and Eugene. And today more than 60 of our state parks are in danger of being closed, smile one of Oregon's most vivid symbols – our salmon – is dangerously close to extinction.

These are problems that money alone will not solve. Quite simple, if we want to save our schools, our streams and our streets, we must change the way government works – and we must change how we view ourselves and each other.

The fact is that in the areas of education, transportation, and natural resources, our government institutions are not working very well. This is due, in part, to the fact that they were designed to deal with problems that existed ten, twenty or even thirty years ago. Times have changed. Priorities have changed. And government must change as well.

I want to stress that the problem is not with public workers, it is with the systems in which they work. Government programs designed to address yesterday's problems are programs that won't work and need to be changed in ways of help public employees work smarter and more productively.

For example, the Department of Transportation was designed to build roads, and they've done a good job. But today we need for than that. Today we need to manage growth and congestion, and the Department must change accordingly.

For example, the Department of Fish and Wildlife was designed, in part, to oversee recreational hunting and fishing. But today we need more than that. Today species protection is among our highest priorities, and the Department must change accordingly.

AS for our school system, it was set up to operate in a world where there was no advanced technology, no global marketplace, and where it was reasonable to assume that education had an end point, and that teachers, once certified, had all the tools they would ever need to do their job. That world is gone governor, and our education system must change accordingly.

In the last two years, I have heard from many Oregonians that government simply doesn't work. They are frustrated by what they see. I want to acknowledge that point of view. In many ways, government is not working. But the answer is not to give up on government. A self-governing society that gives up on government is essentially giving up on itself. The answer is to change government and make it a partner in keeping our quality of life. It's not a question of more government or less government; it's a question of better government.

And, in the final analysis, it is not something government can do for us. It is something that we must do for ourselves by making our government a tool with which to build the future we want.

To accomplish that, here are the change I will propose for the coming legislative session

First – in education: we tend to forget in our discussion about schools that it's not about taxes, unions, administrators or district consolidation. It's about our children. It's about giving kids the best possible shot at success. Let's not forget that.

I believe we do need to put more resource in our schools and colleges to make them better and more affordable. But that increased investment must also be accompanied by increased accountability.

The Education Act for the 21st Century provides us with the basis for quality. The missing piece is accountability.

I believe it is time we take steps to encourage better quality and to provide greater financial accountability in our schools.

Until recently, our K-12 schools were locally funded and the state's responsibility was simply to provide what help it could. Today, as a result of Ballot Measures 5 and 47, the state pays for the best majority of K-12 education.

Clearly teachers are the chief resource in our school system and we must respect and support their work and pay them salaries that reflect their tremendous responsibilities. But it is also important that the decisions on salaries are made by the same level of government that makes the funding decisions.

For that reason, I believe it is time to consider seriously establishing a statewide teach salary schedule who that there is better control and accountability for the single largest cost of education.

I will also seek to institute a system of performance based incentives for teacher and administrations. I will propose that we apply such incentives at the district level – perhaps at the building level – to increase accountability for positive results and to require excellence.

I will propose that we require as much of administrators and teachers as we do of students: that they be able to demonstrate that they have learned and can teach effectively under the Education Act for the 21st Century and that we provide them with the necessary tools to achieve that objective.

Though our state is blessed with many excellent teachers, we must also insure that school managers possess the will and the ability to require and support excellence in the performance of every classroom teacher.

Finally, I will ask to remove barriers to the use of teacher's assistants, volunteers and experts in the community – not as a way to try and reduce the number of teachers, but as a way to provide them with additional help and tools in the classroom.

I stand ready to work with the leadership of the Legislature, teachers, parents and school districts across the state to achieve new levels of cooperation and accountability – bearing in mind that our ultimate goal is to give every Oregon student and education second to none. Our children deserve no less.

Our children also deserve to inherit Oregon with parks, forests, beaches and fish. They deserve to inherit healthy environment – not one in decline.

To do that, we must do thing differently We must move beyond conflict to cooperation if we are to keep this vital part of our quality of life.

Some of my most rewarding moments in the last two years have been meeting ranchers, farmers, fishermen, timber workers and environmentalists. These are the very people who have spent decades picketing one another and are now working together to restore streams – to restore salmon rung one creek at a time.

For all those who believe that our natural resource industries, our farmers and ranchers and the environmental community have nothing in common – you are wrong. In watershed councils throughout the state are working together to literally change the face of Oregon.

I propose we build on this by creating a natural resource investment account. It will help restore Oregon's streams to health. It will help farmers and ranchers to be better stewards of the streams on their property. But most importantly it will give our salmon, trout and steelhead a fighting chance at dodging extinction.

If we succeed in this most ambitious undertaking we do more that save the species – we help preserve a way of life for thousands of farmers, fishermen and others who make t heir living off the land.

The account will also give us the ability to rebuild and retain one of the nation's great parks systems. I, for one, am not willing to stand by and let a parks system a century in the building, dwindle over the course of a decade.

Finally – transportation: We all agree that a good transportation system is essential to our prosperity and population is exploding – 55,000 new Oregonians last year alone and close to 300,000 since 1990. This puts a growing strain on our roads, transit and highways.

Clearly, sole additional resources will be necessary to address this problem, but once again, money alone is not the answer. Money alone won't buy quality of life and will not buy our way out of congestion in the long run.

It's time we challenged the belief that the answer to our transportation problems is simply more money for more roads. It's time we challenged the idea that says we can build our way out of congestion by adding more freeway lanes. That didn't work in Seattle or Los Angeles and it isn't going to work in Oregon.

Instead, any work to expand our transportation system must be done in a way that preserves quality of life while still maintaining economic opportunity. And our efforts must be regionalized, taking into account specific needs that will differ from one part of the state to another, replacing the one-size-fits-all directives historically handed down from Salem. What we're talking about is a new way of making decisions, a new way of doing business.

With the exception of possible indexing, I am not proposing an increase in the gas tax which would have very little long term impact on traffic congestion. Instead, I am proposing a new way to raise money for our roads which I believe will help us manage growth more effectively.

First, is to broaden the base of transportation funding to all those who benefit from roads – not just those who directly use them. This would help keep the gas tax down and would create a fund which could be used in part for transit.

Second, I am proposing that we begin to move toward a system where motorists actually pay based on how many miles they drive – not just how much gas they use. I believe this will give people the incentives they need to explore alternatives to driving or to drive in different ways.

The fact is that not only is our population growing, but more Oregonians are driving more often and further than ever before. WE can't raise enough money to build enough roads to prevent congestion. That is a fact.

The answer lies less in money than it does in changing how and when we use our transportation system. If we hope to preserve our special quality of life, we need to connect highway funding to highway use. We need to make it easier for people to use their cars less.

I believe state government can be a leader in this. I have directed the Department of Administrative Services to bring to me by May 1, a comprehensive plan to reduce the state's share of traffic congestion in the Portland area. Such a plan might consider such things as telecommuting and flex-time work. As a large employer, I believe the state can and must help lead the way toward more creative workplace management that will reduce the burden on our roads.

In conclusion, I believe Oregonians support a common agenda? They want good schools, clean streams, and a transportation system that will help keep Oregon's special quality of life.

Furthermore, I believe there is little disagreement between me and the Legislature concerning the importance of taking bold action in these areas. However, there is some disagreement on how to accomplish these goals.

None of these initiatives are free; all of them will cost something. My responsibility in putting together a budget is to suggest ways to pay for them. I have done that. But if the legislature is willing to meet the same objectives by different means, they will find me a ready and willing partner.

Because this is not a Democratic agenda. This is not a Republican agenda. This is an Oregon agenda – the priorities Oregonians have shared with me over the last two years.

Of course there will be differences between Democrats and Republicans, between House and Senate, between the Governor and the Legislature. Beyond those inevitable differences, lie the answers – but only for those willing to set aside good politics in pursuit of good policy for the people of this state.

The compromises can be reached, but only by those willing to serve the state and her citizens – not by those who serve only their party or personal agenda.

The solutions will be found, because we will search together, exercising wisdom, compassion, and a disregard for political expediency.

Sixty-five years ago, President Roosevelt said, “The nation needs, and unless I mistake its temper, the nation demands bold, innovative action. It is common sense to take an approach and try it. If it doesn’t work, try another, but for God’s sake try something.”

That is the approach I am committed to taking, because unless we begin to do things differently – unless we redefine the terms of the date over these issues – we will lose that quality of place that makes Oregon so special.

Of course there is a risk involved. But it is a far greater risk to keep doing things the old way. Because at state is Oregon itself – its heart, its soul – the Oregon we all love – the place we have chosen to call home. And I for one am not willing to risk losing it.

This is a challenge I cannot meet alone. I will need help and cooperation.

Today I ask each and every one of you to help me make Oregon what we want it to be . . . to join me in blazing a new Oregon Trail – and to help preserve the Oregon mystique bright and untarnished into the 21st Century.