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REACTIONS TO GOVERNOR HOCHUL'S STATE OF THE STATE

As with all State of the State addresses, the governor's speech touched on many laudable topics, but provided limited details. The substance of her plans will presumably be part of her budget package later this month. But based on what we know so far, following are NYPIRG's initial reactions to the governor's proposals:

New York's financially unstable higher education system. The governor recognized the plight of the State University system. Her goal of boosting enrollments to help offset the system's cratering student populations is an important component of how to right the SUNY ship. Yet getting that big of a boost will rely heavily on keeping student costs low, offering a high quality education, and expanding the pool of potential students to those considered "non-traditional."

The governor proposed expanding Tuition Assistance Program (TAP) eligibility to more part-time students and people who are incarcerated, and she proposed that all SUNY and CUNY campuses have on-site childcare centers. But the governor's plans laid out little else in terms of keeping broad-based student costs low. She offered her plans for making it easier to apply to public colleges and universities and to apply for financial aid. Unfortunately, there was little mention of the needs of the independent higher education sector.

Albany's scandal-prone ethical environment. The governor proposed to replace the much-maligned Joint Commission on Public Ethics with a new agency, one in which relies on a board consisting of representatives from law schools. While an interesting idea, it is an untested one, and one in which the details will matter. The governor also proposed an update of local ethics standards – an idea which has been kicked around for decades, but with little success. Unfortunately, she did not address the state's loophole-riddled campaign finance system or mention reforming the state Office of the Inspector General or the Legislative Ethics Commission.

The fight against global warming. The governor offered an impressive list of initiatives to address climate catastrophe. Her plans included an increase in reliance on renewable power, measures to reduce greenhouse gas emissions from buildings, and a phase out of fossil fuel facilities. Her proposal to ban gas hookups in new buildings, but in a timeline that is not fast enough. She also proposed a boost in the use of electric vehicles. Other than the proposed Bond Act, it's not clear where funding for these programs will originate. Her proposal to make New York a "green hydrogen hub" raises concerns. New York should be focusing on programs with a proven track record, like wind, solar, and geothermal, powering an efficient electricity grid. And unfortunately, she does not clearly address one of the biggest energy hogs – cryptomining.

Bolstering New York's recycling efforts. The governor tackled the issue of the state's solid waste problem with her initiative to make producers, not taxpayers, pick up the cost of recycling. But no mention of the

state's most successful recycling program – the Bottle Deposit Law. She also proposed the ban of per- and polyfluoroalkyl substances (PFASs) to limit use of these “forever chemicals” in packaging.

Voting rights. The governor proposed a state-level voting rights act and a plan to make it easier for college students to vote on their campuses. She also proposed to cut the voter registration “black out” period to ten days, as required in the state's constitution. The governor also called for legislation to advance two constitutional amendments: one to eliminate the ten day “black out” period and another to remove the requirement that a voter needs an excuse to obtain an absentee (mail in) ballot.

Transportation. The governor offered extensive plans to react to the transportation needs of the state, in particular to respond to the need to end “rail deserts” in New York City such as with the “Interborough Express”. Importantly, the governor also underlined her commitment to the implementation of Congestion Pricing for its positive impact on mass transit, the environment, and traffic congestion.

Health care. With hundreds of thousands of New Yorkers still lacking access to one of the most basic rights – one to health care, the governor proposed to expand the state's Essential Plan by raising the threshold from 200 percent of the federal poverty line to at least 250 percent. If approved, that plan would “reduce the ranks of the uninsured by at least 14,000 and make healthcare more affordable for at least 92,000 New Yorkers.” While laudable, the plan still leaves too many New Yorkers without coverage.