

AS PREPARED

[INTRODUCTION]

Thank you very much, Speaker Hanshaw.

Thank you, Senate President Smith.

What a great day to be a West Virginian.

First, a warm welcome to the Board of Public Works.

Attorney General J.B. McCuskey, Auditor Mark Hunt, Secretary of State Kris Warner, Treasurer Larry Pack, Agriculture Commissioner Kent Leonhardt, and State Superintendent Michele Blatt.

Welcome to the Chancellor of the Higher Education Policy Committee, Sarah Tucker.

To the West Virginia Supreme Court, thank you. We are honored to have Chief Justice Haley Bunn, Justice Charles Trump, Justice Thomas Ewing, Justice Gerald M. Titus III, and Justice William Wooton with us today.

We are also joined by members of the Intermediate Court of Appeals: Chief Judge Dan Gueear, Judge Charles Lorensen, and Judge Ryan White.

To my cabinet officials, I appreciate the long hours and your hard work. To the members of the House and Senate, thank you.

I would like to take a moment to recognize our wonderful First Lady, Denise, who joins us here.

Tonight, we stand before you, not only as your governor and First Lady, but as two of West Virginia's newest grandparents.

On January 2nd, Denise and I became proud grandparents to a beautiful baby girl, Lucille Marie. Born right here in wild and wonderful at WVU Children's Hospital in Morgantown.

Isn't she adorable? I thank God and Jesus Christ our savior for such an amazing gift.

I asked my daughter if I could bring the baby here tonight, but she didn't think hanging out with this crowd would be a good influence on her.

The future of West Virginia belongs to our kids and our grandkids. And I'm going to fight like hell to make sure that future is bright.

I am 100% committed to delivering, for Lucille and every child in our state, a West Virginia we can be proud of. A shining state in the mountains.

Many West Virginians are still struggling to make ends meet.

Our state is still hurting from the disastrous Biden economy, where we experienced sky-rocketing grocery bills, crushing healthcare costs, and out-of-control energy bills.

I've traveled all across West Virginia and I've listened to these concerns. I hear you. And together, we are going to fix them.

Tonight, I'm asking this legislature, and every West Virginian watching, to join us in achieving our common-sense goals.

Last year, I stood before you and talked about hard truths.

Budget pressures. Obstacles to economic development. Poor healthcare and educational rankings.

Tonight, I can report that we are making real progress. The Mountain State comeback is underway.

[ECONOMIC DEVELOPMENT]

Let me share just some of what we've accomplished.

In the last few months alone, we announced more than \$4.5 billion dollars in new private sector investment. Let me say that again – \$4.5 billion dollars and a projected 4,200 good-paying jobs.

We passed a comprehensive microgrids law which is attracting deep interest from companies across the country. That law will

become one of the single biggest economic development drivers in our history.

Companies are calling – they want in.

When all is said and done, the types of investments under our law could total tens of billions of dollars.

More investments means lower state income taxes. Higher paying jobs. That's the plan.

Our economic development strategy has focused on the fundamentals. That means developing business-ready sites that can accept large-scale projects and improving the infrastructure businesses need to invest, expand, and create jobs in the Mountain State.

Last year, we focused on improving site selection and remediation, and put \$74 million dollars towards water and sewer infrastructure projects across the state.

Clean water and functional infrastructure lift up the standard of living and propel economic growth in our communities.

We must also invest in our workforce.

Through my Workforce Readiness & Opportunity Act, we will encourage micro-credentialing and make portable benefits available for West Virginia's growing independent worker base. We'll accelerate military personnel's ability to enter the workforce.

Tonight, I am also asking to increase funding for our higher education institutions.

Our state will likely need at least 15,000 to 20,000 new construction workers alone over the next few years.

That means more electricians. More plumbers. More skilled trade professionals who can power our growth.

That requires investing in the schools that train our workforce.

By investing in higher education and technical training, we are ensuring that good-paying jobs are available for all West Virginians.

Let's make this happen.

In years passed, we have also failed to keep up with our infrastructure needs.

That's why my administration placed a new emphasis on infrastructure maintenance – improving roads, bridges, and fixing potholes.

Apart from the current road fund, we plan to invest \$100 million dollars to supplement our road and bridge repair work. It's sorely needed.

[RED TAPE]

Of course, all of this means nothing if government stands in the way. That's why we're cutting red tape like never before.

Upon taking office, I declared an economic backyard brawl with our neighboring states.

We focused on fixing our regulatory climate so businesses could move faster, invest with confidence, and create jobs here instead of elsewhere.

Because of the work we accomplished last year, West Virginia is poised to move fast on economic development and win more major projects. That's our advantage. Speed.

Our one-stop permitting process will allow companies to spend less time filling out forms and more time putting people to work.

We have expanded universal licensing reciprocity so qualified professionals can move to the Mountain State without delay.

If you are ready to work – West Virginia is ready for you.

One of the legislators who helped make our universal licensing bill a success was Senator Donna Boley.

After 41 years in the Senate, the longest tenure in state history, she's finally decided she's had enough of us.

But in all seriousness, for more than four decades, Senator Boley faithfully served the people of the Mid-Ohio Valley. Thank you Senator Boley for your service.

[TOURISM]

As we work on the fundamentals of economic development, one area where we already beat the competition is tourism.

Our tourism industry now supports more than 60,000 jobs and surpasses \$9 billion in annual economic impact.

Tourism generated more than \$1 billion in tax revenue last year. \$619 million goes directly to support our state and local governments.

Our investment in tourism is paying off.

That is why I am requesting \$20 million dollars to improve our state parks. We need better lodging, more campsites, and improved roadways leading to these incredible destinations.

[BEAD]

Tourism opens up new pathways into West Virginia.

So too does high-speed internet.

Thanks to our work, and support from our federal and state legislators, West Virginia secured \$546 million in new broadband investments from the Trump Administration.

This means more than 73,000 new locations will have access to high-speed internet.

High-speed internet is no longer a luxury in West Virginia – it is a basic necessity for everyday life.

It is desperately needed to facilitate telehealth, help tutor our kids, operate small businesses, or just to bring families closer together by streaming a movie.

[RURAL HEALTH]

We also recently secured a huge win for healthcare.

In December, West Virginia was awarded \$199 million by the Trump Administration to improve healthcare outcomes.

Over the five years of the grant, we're looking at nearly one billion dollars in healthcare investments.

This is an incredible win for West Virginia, unparalleled in our history. In fact, West Virginia received a higher per-capita award than any of our surrounding states.

I want to thank Secretary Kennedy and Administrator Oz for their commitment to West Virginia. And I want to thank President Donald Trump for his leadership.

I also thank West Virginia's congressional delegation and our state's legislative leadership for helping make this investment possible.

Of course, this application would not have occurred without the over 40 different stakeholders who helped put it together.

We are going to show the nation how to make rural America healthy again.

For generations, poor health has fueled an economic decline, which has in turn, worsened our state's health outcomes.

We're going to break that cycle and replace it with a new, more virtuous one, a cycle where better health strengthens the workforce and improves productivity.

This, in turn, will lift up our standard of living and grow our economy, which will once again improve health outcomes.

We are connecting healthier West Virginians to job opportunities, and preventing and reversing serious health problems through better nutrition, exercise, and lifestyle choices.

Leading a healthier life is a personal journey for all West Virginians. And it's personal for me.

I can report that I have put in some serious miles in my first year. Not only by driving to every corner of the state, but also as a daily walker of the Mountaineer Mile.

I haven't missed a day yet. I'm still grinding – You all know I'm persistent.

When we launched the Mountaineer Mile, I met two extraordinary women, Kristie Tenney and Lauren Winans, who became champions for healthier communities. They created a Mountaineer Mile movement.

Kristie and Lauren are here tonight, and I want to recognize them. Ladies, please stand.

Our healthcare efforts – some ideas coming from key leaders in the legislature – have received national acclaim.

The legislature's efforts to get the unhealthy ingredients and additives out of our food set off a chain reaction that put West Virginia on the map.

We then followed up with proposals to eliminate the entitlement for soda under SNAP, and bring work requirements to SNAP and Medicaid. We are making progress.

Tonight, I am asking lawmakers to support our Rural Healthcare Transformation through advancing legislative initiatives that promote prevention, wellness, and personal responsibility.

That includes helping to train our physicians in medical school about nutrition, educating the public about new dietary guidelines, and reinstating the Presidential Fitness test.

Our rural health care plan will transform West Virginia. But we must act fast and authorize it without delay.

We will make West Virginia healthy again.

[ENERGY]

For generations, West Virginia powered America. Our coal miners traveled deep inside the earth to extract the rock that lit our homes and forged our steel.

Our oil and gas workers broke their backs to heat our living rooms and run our factories. We helped win world wars.

We are, and always will be, America's energy state.

And tonight, I'm here to tell you, our energy WILL power America's future.

That's what our "50 by 50" plan is all about. An ambitious initiative to more than triple our power generation by 2050.

By prioritizing reliable baseload power through coal, natural gas, and nuclear, while supporting all major energy sources, we are building an energy strategy that will increase power generation

from 16 to 50 gigawatts and will power America for the next half century and beyond.

But this plan isn't just about generating electricity. It's generating opportunity.

Creating high-paying jobs.

Strengthening our economy.

And charting a bold path forward that lifts up our people.

With President Trump in the White House, we have a true partner who understands West Virginia.

As the President works to reinvigorate America's manufacturing base, Mountaineers can take pride in knowing THAT effort will be powered by West Virginia.

In just four months since announcing 50 by 50, West Virginia has secured more than \$4.2 billion in new energy investments.

None of this would be possible without our energy producers, our technicians, our drillers, and our miners.

Please join me in thanking our coal and natural gas partners who have been working with West Virginia through thick and thin.

West Virginia has power – and by God, we're going to use it.

[REDUCING GOVERNMENT]

We also made government smaller. Our state government is too large. Too many agencies. Too many boards. And too much bureaucracy standing in your way.

That's why we've been so focused on fiscal responsibility and repurposing government.

We are always looking for new ways to return more of our taxpayers' hard-earned money. It's the people's money!

Last year, we made tough decisions.

We brought back six-year budget estimates, streamlined departments, audited agencies, and got the government out of the long-term care facility business...

A business the state never should have been in.

[PEIA]

We've also made some progress on P-E-I-A. After years of double-digit premium increases, P-E-I-A premiums this year will be limited to three percent.

That's not ten or 14 percent, it's three.

To truly position P-E-I-A for long-term success however, the legislature will need to work with me on real reforms.

[HUMAN SERVICES]

That same commitment to confronting hard realities is guiding our work in other areas.

The child welfare system has faced serious challenges for far too long.

We. Can. Change. That.

We've advanced initiatives to increase transparency, reduce CPS backlogs, produce better-trained CPS workers, and bring more accountability to our officials.

And we've developed a plan to attack the root causes of this decade-long crisis.

First, West Virginia has sent too many of our foster kids out of state to receive care they should receive right here at home.

Those placements are costly. They separate children from their families and communities. And they often lead to longer stays and worse outcomes.

That's why I've called for the establishment of the Bring Them Home Fund.

With a modest investment of \$6 million dollars, we can rehabilitate existing state facilities, transform them into world-class centers of care, and begin bringing our children back home.

This approach will save our state tens of millions of dollars and provide our children the stability, care, and foundation they need to grow, heal, and prosper.

Let's bring our kids home, where they belong.

Second, we're proposing school-within-a-school programs for at-risk students.

These initiatives use immersive, project-based learning with a strong focus on STEM and real-world skills.

These types of systems in other states have shown an 81 percent decrease in behavior incidents and a 63 percent increase in attendance.

Third, our Faith-Based Initiative will utilize the vital long-term support of faith-based communities.

Community-powered networks can significantly reduce placement disruptions and caregiver burnout by providing essential support like respite care, meals, and mentorship.

I believe the Lord's influence can make a real difference . . . faith-based efforts work.

Fourth, our truancy diversion initiative will catch kids before they fall through the cracks. It will address chronic absenteeism through interventions such as truancy courts.

By helping kids before they enter the child welfare system, we can save more children, save thousands of dollars on investigation and court costs, and ultimately keep students in school.

[DRUGS & BORDER CONTROL]

Keeping kids safe also means taking on the drug epidemic that devastated our state.

As attorney general, I spent many years fighting to hold drug companies accountable for their actions and worked closely with counties and cities to bring in over one billion dollars to our state in settlement monies.

That work, along with our new enforcement strategies and partnerships with President Trump, is making a big difference in reducing the number of drug overdoses in our state.

Preliminary estimates show that between June of 2024 and May of 2025, there was a nearly 40 percent decline in drug overdose deaths.

We must not let up, and we must continue to attack the root causes of this terrible epidemic.

That, along with continuing to partner with President Trump on border security and fighting crime, must be a priority.

Isn't it great to have a President, Donald J. Trump, who enforces our borders?

[RILEY GAINES ACT]

We also made progress this year in upholding our West Virginia values – our defense of life, our robust support of the Second Amendment, and our opposition to woke philosophy.

We also continued the fight for religious liberty.

We clearly defined men and women in state code. I signed the Riley Gaines Act and made it clear: West Virginians aren't confused. We know the difference between men and women.

On a related note, I want to applaud our state attorney general, J.B. McCuskey, and his team for their arguments yesterday before the U.S. Supreme Court.

For years, as attorney general, I fought to keep men out of women's sports. I filed the appeal to SCOTUS that was ultimately heard yesterday.

Girls should never be forced to play sports against boys.

Good luck to you on finishing our landmark case, Mr. Attorney General. Bring home a big victory!!

[LEGISLATIVE PROPOSALS]

We have a few more wins ready for this body. Let's act on them.

Tonight, I am asking for a 3% pay raise for all state workers.

These state employees are the people who teach our kids, fix our roads and bridges, guard our prisons, and police our streets.

They show up every day to serve others, often putting the needs of their communities ahead of their own.

They have earned a pay raise, but we can't stop there.

[TAX CUTS]

To kickstart economic growth and return money back to the people, I am asking the legislature to pass a ten percent income tax cut.

We are also asking the legislature to conform with the PERMANENT tax changes signed into law by President Trump.

This move, coupled with expansions to the Historic Rehab Tax Credit, the West Virginia Tourism Development Act, and simplifications to our state's tax code will facilitate more capital investment into our state.

Here's why this matters – it will keep more money in the pockets of West Virginians and make life more affordable.

We need tax relief now.

Members of the House and Senate, we can afford this tax cut!

Let's get it done.

Already, through six months of this fiscal year, West Virginia is enjoying a 128 million dollar surplus. We can use these dollars and savings generated by other offsets to reach that ten percent level.

And let's have them take effect right away.

If we do this, and we must, this will allow our state to keep pace with Kentucky, Ohio, and other states.

[HOPE SCHOLARSHIP]

Our dedication to fiscal responsibility is also allowing us to fully fund the HOPE scholarship.

<<APPLAUSE>>

We have built it into our baseline so that HOPE funding is not dependent upon surpluses. We are pre-paying all of next year's HOPE Scholarship as a commitment to this policy.

We're doing this to help families like the McCutheons who are here with us tonight. Pastor Joey McCutheon and his wife,

Bethanie, dreamed of having their children educated in a Christian School.

Before the HOPE scholarship, that dream was out of reach. Like many West Virginians, the costs of sending their children to a private school was simply too high.

But now, thanks to the HOPE Scholarship, all three of their children are not just making it – they are thriving.

Let's give a round of applause to the McCutheons.

[LETRS]

We're also investing heavily in public education.

We're implementing LETRS, a policy grounded in the science of reading.

Educators who complete the LETRS training demonstrate significantly stronger understanding in how reading develops and how to teach it.

Mississippi was at the bottom of the national rankings before they implemented LETRS. They moved up a lot. Now, we can as well.

We also want to expand digital literacy – to better use technology to support learning in our K through 12 schools and at our state colleges.

Modern tools can help personalize instruction, provide extra tutoring, and offer students with access to high-quality educational resources.

It all starts with equipping every child with the skills needed for a good-paying job so they can pursue their dreams - with or without a four-year college degree.

[FLOOD PREP]

No matter how much we invest in our children's future, it will mean very little if we fail to protect the communities they call home.

Finding a solution to our state's flooding problems remains high on my list of priorities.

That is why we are launching a new pilot initiative called SENTRY.

And we are asking the legislature for ten million dollars to fund this pilot.

Unfortunately, for families in flood stricken areas, warnings come too late. Traditional river gauges can tell us when water has risen to flood stage, but by then, the flood is already underway.

SENTRY promises to modernize how West Virginia detects flood risk and warns the public.

By expanding sensors in key areas, we can build predictive models and react to leading indicators instead of lagging indicators.

Those forecasts promise to identify flood risk one to six hours ahead with a target accuracy of more than 90 percent.

THIS is about protecting lives.

It's about giving West Virginians time – time to act, time to move, time to stay safe.

[NATIONAL GUARD]

The National Guard has always been instrumental in responding to floods and countless other emergencies across our state.

I want to thank General Seward for his leadership in guiding the men and women of the Guard.

In November, we were devastated by a brutal terrorist attack on Staff Sergeant Andrew Wolfe and Specialist Sarah Beckstrom.

While on patrol, they were ambushed and shot at point-blank range. Specialist Beckstrom succumbed to her injuries and was laid to rest at the West Virginia National Cemetery.

Staff Sergeant Wolfe, through the grace of God and the prayers his mother, Melody, asked for, continues his recovery.

Tonight, we are honored to have Sarah's parents, Evalea and Gary Beckstrom, with us. We are also honored to be joined by Andrew's father, Jason.

I ask that you stand so that all of West Virginia can show you their gratitude and respect.

Your strength, your faith, and your love for these heroes inspire us all.

This day and every day, the Guard serves with distinction.

In fact, while on patrol in the nation's capital, a group of West Virginia Guardsmen noticed smoke coming from an apartment complex.

Without hesitation, they gained entry, contained the fire, and escorted residents to safety – all before emergency services arrived.

Their quick thinking, courage, and commitment to protecting others helped save lives.

Two of those Guardsmen, Sergeant Devin Cantwell and Private First Class Tyler Farley, are here with us tonight.

Please join me in thanking them for their service and their heroism.

[ROLLING THUNDER MINE]

At the heart of our state's story is the courage of those who serve, even in the face of unthinkable danger.

We were reminded of that courage last November, through the loss of Steve Lipscomb at Rolling Thunder Mine.

I'd like to recognize Heather – Steve's wife – who joins us here at the Capitol. As she faced the devastating loss of her husband, West Virginians rallied around her, and the rest of the Lipscomb family.

The courage demonstrated by the rescue and dive teams will never be forgotten.

One of those men, Tucker Palmatier of White Sulphur Springs, is with us tonight, along with his wife, Rebecca.

Tucker was the first rescue diver into the mix.

Tucker showed no hesitation diving deep into the flooded mine – facing pitch-black water, collapsed rock, and narrow passages.

That bravery reflects the very best of West Virginia. Tucker, I ask that you rise so the people of this great state may recognize you.

[AMERICA'S 250TH ANNIVERSARY]

The choices we make will shape West Virginia's future.

2026 will be a memorable year.

One of the celebrations I'll be looking forward to is the 250th Anniversary of the United States of America.

And right here in Charleston, we will host a major, signature celebration that brings West Virginians together to honor our history, our values, and our future.

America is an extraordinary nation. Our story is one of courage, sacrifice, faith, and freedom. And we are proud to celebrate 250 years of the United States of America.

From our small towns to our largest cities, we will honor the men and women who built this nation, defended our freedom, and kept the American dream alive for generations.

[CONCLUSION]

Tonight, I shared the progress we have made. But our work is not finished.

We are not here to celebrate the end of a journey. We are here to strengthen the foundation for our children for generations to come.

West Virginia is in a different place than it was just last year.

We are more competitive...

We are more prepared...

And more determined to create opportunity...

As I shared earlier, I'm a proud new grandfather.

And just like any grandfather or parent, we make sacrifices and hard choices so that the world our kids and grandkids inherit will be better.

That's the spirit that built West Virginia. And that's the spirit that is driving us forward today.

The future we are shaping is one where families can thrive...

Workers can succeed...

And businesses can grow.

Where our kids and our grandkids have the opportunity to achieve big dreams...

Right here in West Virginia.

The state of our state is getting stronger.

We are building a better West Virginia.

And we are just getting started.

Thank you. God bless you. And may God bless the great state of West Virginia.