

Words and money: Carcieri faces financial storm

01:00 AM EST on Sunday, February 4, 2007

Governor Carcieri's proposed budget would increase money for education and college scholarships but would cut subsidized child-care.

The Providence Journal / Connie Grosch

Governor Carcieri's State of the State address Tuesday night had some nice touches —especially a powerful, emotional wallop at the end.

But it also was a lost opportunity. Appearing before the Democrat-controlled General Assembly and a statewide television audience, the Republican governor filled the speech with boasts of progress made and talk of things he'd like to do. And sure, I'm with him when he touts the importance of education, energy and the environment and when, in the interest of getting things done, he strokes the egos of Democratic legislators, with whom political calculations often otherwise prompt him to squabble.

And some of his comments drew bipartisan applause. (At other times that noise you heard came essentially from the tiny ranks of GOP lawmakers and from Carcieri cabinet members and assorted claquers.)

Assessing the speech, Senate President Joe Montalbano graciously told me, "It was a good vision that he has for Rhode Island. It was a good framework for us to work together."

Montalbano especially liked the noise Carcieri made about putting more money into school aid.

But it was obvious that the speech lacked something — and I don't mean just a major point noted immediately by Democratic Lt. Gov. Elizabeth Roberts. She cited a lack of commitment by Carcieri to universal health care. "I think I would like to have seen the governor speak more about that," she said. "I will clearly be speaking about that."

The overarching problem with Carcieri's speech in the House chamber was that it barely discussed what he called "the elephant in the room," the gaping budget deficit. (In a reference to the Assembly's lopsided partisan makeup, the breezy governor quipped, "I wouldn't mind seeing a few more elephants in the room!")

The huge dimensions of the grim financial picture would become fully apparent when Carcieri submitted the budget on Wednesday, marking the occasion with a news conference in the ornate State Room.

Carcieri said that in a tough situation he did the best he could to protect the most vulnerable. "We've tried to balance out a whole lot of different interests here."

He proposes increased education aid and college scholarships. But, among other things, he'd drop a third of the families who receive subsidized childcare, cut back services at the Department of Children, Youth and Families, make state employees take several unpaid days off, and ax hundreds of state workers.

Legislative Democrats could massage or even reject his proposals, especially if May revenue estimates are bright.

George Nee, of the AFL-CIO, grumbled about several aspects of the proposed budget, but said its submission is just "the first step of a long journey."

The childcare cut seems astonishingly shortsighted for a governor so keen on economic development, and it's hard to believe the Democrats will go along with it, though something will have to give somewhere. Rep. Steve Costantino, House Finance chairman, said of the need to come up with money: "If we support these programs again, we will have to go deeper in other areas to obtain those cuts."

In regard to childcare, the governor said, "I've got family members that go to work and pay their own childcare. It's a question of what you can afford to pay and sustain and what the obligation of the state is."

He said he hoped the cut would not force people onto the unemployment or welfare rolls.

I mentioned a study from the Women's Fund of Rhode Island. It said women here are more likely to be poor, to work part-time, and to lack access to health insurance than they were five years ago.

I asked the governor how his budget would improve their situation.

His answer was vintage Carcieri. Depending on how you view him, it demonstrated the former business executive's messianic salesmanship — or an inability to identify with the struggle of people on the edge:

"I want everybody to succeed. What happens too often in this conversation — it's sort of like we're arguing over a pie that's static. What I'm trying to do is grow the pie, grow the economy, grow the wages, grow the jobs that will provide the revenue to do the kinds of things that we would [want to do]. That will provide the opportunities for people to have jobs and support themselves, be able to pay for their own childcare if that's what they choose to do....

"To say that because we're cutting back childcare we are setting back the plight of women and single women, I don't think is quite fair. There's a whole host of reasons, you know as well as I do, as to why women, and single women in particular, are in the situation they're in. And I'm not going to be the sociologist here, but I think we can only do so much. I want programs that are sustainable, where everybody is moving ahead....

"I don't think it's the state's obligation, myself — the General Assembly may disagree with me — to pay childcare.... That's not our job. Our job as a state is to create an environment where jobs are growing and opportunities are there and then let people take advantage of those things."

(In regard to women, Carcieri spokesman Jeff Neal said later that the governor also could have asserted that his proposed boost in school aid plus an extra \$1 million for adult education would contribute to improved job skills and opportunities.)

I asked Carcieri on Wednesday why he hadn't devoted more of his State of the State to educating legislators and taxpayers in general about the financial crunch. He said it was important to talk about vision and to avoid the impression that Rhode Island is drowning. "Too often we get all caught up in the problems," he declared.

"And by the way," he added, things are moving "in a very positive direction."

Which is not how Kate Brewster of the Poverty Institute at Rhode Island College talks.

She says it would be impossible for a single mom affected by the childcare cuts to pay for regulated daycare, at least not without discombobulating her life. So, among other things, her "choices" will include "showing up at a homeless shelter or showing up at a food pantry to put food on the table or forgoing her RIte Care (health insurance for lower-income people) because she can't afford the premiums or the insurance at work."

Or, says Brewster, maybe she'll take a lesser job to keep income low enough to maintain daycare eligibility. Or maybe a sympathetic provider will charge less and see her own income diminished.

Of course, there's also unregulated childcare. But Brewster says that, too, can be pricey while at the same time falling short of safety and quality standards.

Brewster says good daycare is a great economic development investment for a state because it provides early education, allows lower-wage mothers to work with peace of mind, and helps build childcare, an industry in itself.

Lieutenant Governor Roberts says it's ironic to propose childcare cuts when economic development is such an important goal. She also pounces on the fact that the proposed budget ignores a projected \$7-million deficit at the Rhode Island Public Transit Authority, thereby leaving it up to RIPTA to figure out what to do. (Like, um, increase fares and/or slash service?)

Roberts notes that many people rely on RIPTA to get to work and that many runs are overcrowded. "We can't turn away from them when they need financial support."

One place she thinks the state can both save big money and provide better health care: Implement a program already passed by the legislature dealing with adults with disabilities.

Incidentally, I mentioned to Carcieri that Roberts had faulted his State of the State speech's failure to embrace the goal of universal health insurance, something Massachusetts is moving toward. Carcieri cited for me several steps he does support. But he predicted that, when the financial "realities" set in, Massachusetts won't be able to afford its ambitious new program.

But listen. I want to tell you about the climax of the State of the State.

As is customary, the governor used the speech as a way to spotlight several accomplished individuals.

For example, Carcieri, who early in his career was a teacher, had Catherine Davis Hayes, the state's 2007 teacher of the year, take a bow from her balcony perch, and she received a nice standing ovation. (When I asked this visual arts teacher at Warwick's Oakland Beach Elementary what makes a great teacher, she said, "A passion for what you're doing, a real love for children, a desire to see all children succeed." She added, "I feel that I'm not an art teacher — that's my label, you know, I'm an elementary art teacher — but it's my responsibility to teach children, period.")

Now Carcieri paid tribute to the military serving in Iraq and Afghanistan.

He said, "Please join me in thanking two of their representatives here tonight, Lt. Col. Kathleen Sullivan and Lt. Col. John Sullivan, pilots for the Air National Guard. They also happen to be married to each other.

"Both flew combat missions in Iraq and Afghanistan....Their children in Rhode Island would be cared for by Kathleen's parents."

The couple, who returned in December, rose on the House floor and basked as a prolonged standing O flooded over them.

It was a tremendous moment, leading up to the singing of "God Bless America."

I spoke with the Sullivans later at a State Room reception.

I asked Kathleen Sullivan how it felt to be introduced by Carcieri and applauded so warmly.

She said, "It took my breath away, you know? We're honored to serve our country, and we're even more honored to be here to represent the men and women that are overseas."

John Sullivan said, "It was very humbling. We're very proud to be here, of course. We feel like other people deserve it more than we do.... Our unit's

been activated for over four years now and it's been a long road, but at the same time everyone is upbeat about what they're doing."

I think the war in Iraq is a tragedy, but I have enormous respect for the troops, and the Sullivans took my breath away.

I asked what they thought of the war. Kathleen said, "It was a real honor for me to serve. The men and women over there are doing an unbelievably wonderful job and working really hard, and morale is extremely high. And I think that people want to go back and finish the job we started."

Does she want to go back?

"Sure. Absolutely."

John said it was true for him too. "We're just proud to be able to do what we're trying to do....We stand by the commander in chief."

All I can say is: God bless the Sullivans. It was an honor for me to meet them.

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