

Republican response | Rep. Norma Smith | January 13, 2015

Hello. I'm State Representative Norma Smith. It's a pleasure to be here, speaking with you today about our shared goals for the state of Washington.

What an honor and privilege it is to serve you. There are those who would have you believe that the Legislature is home to nothing but gridlock and bickering. But this is not Washington, D.C. We are a part-time citizen legislature – here in Olympia for a few months at the beginning of each year, and then we return home to our jobs, our families and other legislative responsibilities.

Be encouraged – there are good men and women here on both sides of the aisle committed to making Washington state a better place for you and your family. Yep, there will be drama. But know this: It will not erode our commitment to doing what's best.

We care deeply about the paramount duty of education. We care deeply about the most vulnerable among us – those who struggle with mental illness, those with developmental disabilities, those who are homeless – all of our fellow citizens who need our help and support. We care about policies that can empower them. We care deeply about jobs that can offer a hope and a future for every Washingtonian. There has been, and will continue to be, good work accomplished.

During this legislative session, you're going to hear a lot from us about funding education first. Why does it matter? It matters because our state's founders, the people who wrote and agreed on our state constitution, made it the paramount duty of the governor and the legislature, because of the value of our children – our hope and our future.

We are serious about giving all of our children an education that will allow them to compete for the jobs of the future, and instill in them a lifetime love of learning. Our family home has always been a gathering place for young people, my heart has been so touched by their longing to make a difference. Let's make sure our work in education equips them to do so.

The good news is that, thanks to you, the taxpayers, state government is getting an additional 3 billion dollars in revenue going into this budget cycle. That's an 8.6 percent increase over the last budget cycle. How many families have seen this type of increase in their family budgets? If we are thoughtful and careful about how we spend your tax dollars, and prioritize, we can balance our state budget without tax increases. That should always be the goal.

And yes, we must rectify the failure of the past three decades, where leadership in Olympia has allowed non-education spending to dramatically outpace education spending. Simply put: education has not been the top priority. Funding education first would change that.

But putting more money into the system must not be our only response. We want to make sure we have a public education system that is doing what is right for our children. Reforms are necessary, but we want to recognize the teachers and staff who are working heroically to

give our students the best possible education. It's important that we give our schools the breathing room to implement reforms that we've enacted.

We are also committed to a transportation infrastructure in Washington state that is foundational to a healthy economy, and to moving people and products where they need to go. We can accomplish that, as long as we are honest about the critical reforms that are needed – so we can prevent the problems we're seeing – such as the Seattle Tunnel Project, the 520 Bridge replacement and issues within our ferry system. Taxpayers shouldn't have to accept, or pay for, failures. We understand that it will take political courage to provide the accountability you expect of us.

I once heard a quote that has stayed with me ever since: "Be a good ancestor." It rang true because my own parents lived it. It motivates me to this day. It's about looking past ourselves, and living in a way that is mindful of future generations.

Many of us in the Legislature, myself included, have proposed and accomplished significant policies that will give us, and our children and grandchildren, bluer skies and life-giving water. That's why we have worked in a collaborative way on many important, game-changing environmental policies: Forest health, to help prevent devastating wildfires; cleaning up old, derelict vessels that pollute our waterways; removing old legacy nets that threaten the health of Puget Sound; toxic site cleanup; clearing passages for fish; and others. And that's also why I am personally committed to developing socially responsible, renewable sources of energy.

We want to be good stewards of our beautiful environment, and the incredible way of life we've had entrusted to us here in Washington state.

The governor is also, clearly, committed to protecting our environment. However, there is room on this issue for reasonable debate, for people who care deeply about environmental stewardship, but who disagree with the approach the governor is taking.

The governor says we need to create a new fuel mandate and new taxes to demonstrate leadership. But his proposals will have almost zero impact on the global challenges we are facing. And even more puzzling, and frustrating, is he is not recognizing the amazing work Washingtonians have already done to improve air and water quality. Can, and should we do more? Yes, and we are. We have positioned ourselves as a global leader in environmental stewardship. We are demonstrating to the world that economic activity and environmental health is not an either/or scenario -- you can have world class agriculture, world class advanced manufacturing, and a clean environment.

We're blessed. Seventy percent of our power is generated by clean, green, renewable hydropower. Additional supplies come from wind, nuclear and solar -- and emerging game-changing sources are on the horizon. Our low cost, clean energy is the envy of the nation -- why would we jeopardize that?

We are absolutely willing to consider pollution-reducing ideas that will work, and that won't place such a terrible burden on the hard-working people of Washington state, particularly those in the middle class, and those who are struggling.

Why does getting this right matter so much? We have a robust production sector in our economy, employing hundreds of thousands of skilled workers who are building, growing, creating and producing the food and products we – and the rest of the world – all rely on every day for our quality of life.

It is the production sector of our economy that provides most of the highest-paying middle-class jobs for those who don't have a four-year or advanced degree – that's nearly sixty percent of all working Washingtonians. These families, struggling in a fragile, recovering economy, have the most to lose if the governor's policies are implemented.

His proposals do, indeed, have a cost. They would increase the cost of our food, our utility bills, and our fuel to get to and from work. And they would hit hard our rural communities.

Why then, would you put on the table any proposal that has in its crosshairs the very sector of our economy most crucial to our economic recovery and vitality? Why would we consider a proposal that would hit hardest the employers and the people who are the very backbone of our economy: the hard-working folks trying to provide for their families and offer their children a better tomorrow, who don't necessarily have letters in front of, or behind their names?

While we are so grateful for the amazing visionaries who fuel the innovation sector of our economy, and the people who enrich our lives with so many of life's essential and enjoyed services, we must never forget: the anchor of a sustained economy that has robust opportunities for the middle class, for those determined by hard work and effort to improve their family's stars, is the production sector – made up of the men and women who build and grow our future.

Just look around the nation and world at the economies where those production opportunities have been lost, and the resulting devastation of the middle class, their wages, and their hopes for the future. Let's not accept punitive ideas that take money from hard-working families and re-distribute it to political allies. Let's not grow government unnecessarily. Let's not threaten our economic recovery. Instead, let's foster an environment where robust research and innovation in our private sector and research institutions will help us solve the problems of today and advance socially responsible technologies and solutions for tomorrow. We are a leading state for exports that are changing the world – let's also be determined to export hope and opportunity, and a vibrant vision for the future.

We are committed to governing responsibly so that every Washingtonian will have the opportunity to contribute to – and benefit from – a healthy, robust economy and education system ... while enjoying the extraordinary beauty of our natural environment – our home here in Washington state.

Thank you so much ... and may God bless you.