

State Net Capitol Journal

Interview: Washington Gov. Christine Gregoire, January 2006

SNCJ: What is your top policy priority for 2006?

Gregoire : I think the budget truly is probably the number one issue because we are very fortunate to sit on a \$1.4 billion surplus. The challenge for me is to make sure that by the end of that session, we've put a good amount of that away for savings rather than spending it. I think we need to look out for the potential slowing down of the economy, or even an emergency. I should make some very strategic investments. Education will be the number one investment, but I'm clearly going to be asking for us to put away a large portion of this surplus and save it for the day when we really need it, rather than being confronted with the problem of potentially having Draconian budget cuts or taxes in a year with the new biennial budget due.

SNCJ: You mentioned a possible emergency. Clearly in 2005 we saw potential for that. Katrina exposed a lot of the serious flaws in disasters preparedness in all levels of government. Where do you stand in preparation for a disaster of that magnitude?

Gregoire : I think it would be hard for anybody to say, 'we're prepared for something of that magnitude.' But, this year we have really stepped up to make sure that we've got the best coordination we can between cities, counties and the state. I am strategically going to invest in some key areas this year, such as tsunami warnings, and we're also going to invest in our seismic equipment to make sure it's absolutely in top form. We're going to make sure our communications system is interoperable, with communicate centers in both the western and eastern parts of the state. Most importantly, our voters last November really took a major step forward by turning back an initiative that would've repealed a 9.5-cent-per-gallon gas tax increase that the legislature and I put in place for investing in our basic infrastructure so that we could withstand a devastating earthquake. We believe the levees of New Orleans are basically our bridges and the hurricane is our earthquake, and we're getting ready for it.

SNCJ: Not only did voters in your state okay that tax hike, COLORADO voters agreed to accept a five-year TABOR moratorium, meaning they also voted themselves a tax hike. Does this signal to you that the public is changing its view on taxation?

Gregoire : Well, I'm very pleased. Katrina was a wake up call to us that we had to invest in our basic highway bridge infrastructure if we were going to withstand a natural disaster like what took place in the Gulf. I think it was an indication that the public is willing to invest if they're going to see a return on that investment. If they're absolutely certain that the money is going to go for the purpose it's being promised, and that there's accountability.

SNCJ: Western states' governors defied normal partisan politics by joining together on numerous issues in 2005 - roadless rules, potential ESA changes, new emissions laws, a regional primary, immigration, etc. Do you expect more of these "partnerships" in 2006 and, if so, what issues are the most likely candidates?

Gregoire : I really do. A specific example is a new federal requirement for people to have passports to get across the border into Canada. In states like Washington, IDAHO and MONTANA, we know that requirement will have a dramatically negative impact on our relationship with our Canadian friends, and do very little to enhance our own security. Both Republican and Democrat governors are also coming together to send a clear message that Medicaid cuts are a very short sided way for the federal government to go because states cannot just absorb that extra cost. By failing to fund basic healthcare needs, you're simply costing taxpayers more money by shoving people into emergency rooms when they could have gotten preventive care appropriately elsewhere. So I see us as continuing to work much, much more forcefully together because these are not partisan issues, these are issues that every citizen in our respective states care very much about.

SNCJ: Along those lines, the rift between states and the federal government seems to have grown to crisis level, with significant disagreements on everything from homeland security & Real ID to Medicaid & immigration. Given that this is an election year for both Congress and 36 governors, do you think this situation will be better or worse in 2006?

Gregoire : Well, there's no question it's going to be a hard fought set of races, both at the governors level and in Congress, and we clearly have a big division between the states and the federal government right now. I would hope, as partisan as the elections will be, that at the end of the day, those who are elected as governors in particular can continue to work together because these are serious issues that are dividing us now with the federal government.

SNCJ: Your state Supreme Court still hasn't rendered its decision on whether or not it will legalize gay marriage in Washington. You've been fairly outspoken that the state should take a progressive approach to this issue, but you've stopped short of endorsing the legalization of gay marriage. What do you see happening with gay marriage in 2006?

Gregoire : I think everybody in our state expects our Supreme Court to rule on that issue almost every Thursday, but for some reason they haven't yet done so. Our last legislative session was probably one of the most progressive, positive and bipartisan sessions in our state's history, but we left one thing on the table that wasn't done. I think we need to come back this time and get it done, and that is sending a very clear message that Washington will not accept discrimination in any way, shape or form.

SNCJ: There seems to be a growing trend among governors to travel abroad to drum up trade in the global market. You went to Asia last fall and Europe before that. Do you feel it's one of your primary responsibilities to get out there and sell the state internationally?

Gregoire : Absolutely. We're the most trade-dependent state in the nation, with literally one in three jobs directly or indirectly dependent on international trade. Asia, for example, is one of our major trading partners, and I learned very clearly that trade success with those countries is totally about relationships and their respect for government officials. In China, for instance, I can introduce a Washington company that could not otherwise get its products into that market. Simply because of my role as governor, they accept that the companies I introduce are credible and they should do

business with them. We've had huge success from my (August 2005) trade mission there, selling about \$6.5 million dollars worth of merchandise and getting another \$24 million in orders from small businesses. So this is an extremely important role for governors generally, and a key role for a governor of this state.

SNCJ: Several governors have made similar inroads into Cuba. At the same time, we all know the situation with Cuba and how our government views that relationship. Given that, do you support similar trade between Washington and Cuba?

Gregoire : Yes. As matter of fact, Maria Cantwell, our United States senator, has visited Cuba and was able to negotiate a number of contracts for agricultural products from our state. In my opinion, my role as governor is to let the federal government do what it needs to do in terms of its relationship with these countries, but if I want our economy to advance, I really have to be in there doing whatever I can to make sure that we're setting up good trade relationships with these countries. I'll continue to work with Cuba and I'll continue to work with Asia because my goal is to ensure that Washington is a good trading partner around the world.

SNCJ: Celebrities are mentioned more and more in many states as possible gubernatorial candidates. Given everything we have just discussed, does it concern you that both parties are possibly shortchanging people by getting people elected that really don't have the background to be doing this?

Gregoire : As governor, I'm the CEO of one of largest businesses in the state. I literally make decisions that affect the lives and the livelihood of 6 million people. I believe voters are looking for someone that really understands the everyday problems that they're facing in their own homes and who is willing to go out there and tackle those problems head on. I think that anybody ought to be able to run and be able to get their message out, but the job of governor can't just be turned into a popularity contest. This is really about hiring a CEO that is capable of addressing some of the most difficult problems that any company would ever address, and doing so in a way that is a positive influence to the average citizen. I am troubled that we have turned it into a popularity contest and then are totally disappointed when we can't reform our education system, solve the healthcare crisis, or give an opportunity for everybody to have a good paying, high-quality job. All too often, you can almost buy your way into office, but that's not the country I believe we are.

SNCJ: All that said, if you could fix only one problem your state currently faces before you leave office, which one would it be and why?

Gregoire : If I had the wand to make it happen I would solve the healthcare crisis in my state, which is a crisis in this country. We don't have the level of quality that we need and deserve. We've got hundreds of thousands of people in my state without coverage and many more thousands under-covered. If I could only have one, that's the one I'd love to solve.