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As prepared for delivery

#DESOTS

Lt. Governor Hall-Long, Mister Speaker, Mister President Pro Temp, Members of the 151st General Assembly, Members of the Cabinet, Distinguished members of the Judiciary, and my fellow Delawareans: Thank you for inviting me into the chamber today, and thank you for tuning in virtually during this very unusual time.

Section 15 of the Delaware Constitution reads as follows:

The Governor shall, from time to time, give to the General Assembly information of affairs concerning the State and recommend to its consideration such measures as he or she shall judge expedient.

And so my task today is to give you, the General Assembly, the state of our state.

Over the course of this pandemic, and especially over the course of the past few weeks, we've all wrestled with existential questions for the state of the state, here in Delaware, and of course nationally. What is the role of the state? What happens when life and liberty are in conflict? What does it mean when those charged with safeguarding our nation's democracy threaten it?

The past year brought us a once-in-a-generation public health crisis, civil unrest and racial tensions. A contentious – but free and fair – election. And a violent attempt to overturn that election. It's understandable then, to feel concerned about the state of our state. Or that the state of our state is tenuous, weak, or even on the decline.

But I am here today to offer a clear counter message. Over the past year Delawareans have worked hard, kept our focus, strengthened our resolve, and looked out for one another.

As a result of the good work of so many, I stand here confidently, proudly, and gratefully to tell you that the state of our state is resilient. It's determined. It's strong. And it is getting stronger.

Let me explain.

I'll start with the state of our budget and our economy.

When I stood in this chamber one year ago, we had a \$200 million surplus. By April, the economic downturn, brought on by the pandemic, had wiped out that surplus. And like every state in the country, we faced a looming deficit.

But *unlike* most other states, Delaware was ready. With your help, we spent the previous three years *getting* ready.

With many of you, I hosted town hall meetings in communities across our state. We promised to build a long-term, sustainable budget. A budget that would work for Delaware families.

And we kept that promise.

We built up our reserves -- while making investments where needed the most.

When the COVID-19 crisis hit, we balanced our budget without cutting critical services.

Without raising taxes on Delaware families or businesses.

Without borrowing money to pay our bills.

And without laying off state employees or cutting their pay – as so many other states were forced to do.

Thanks in part to these responsible budgeting practices, Delaware maintained our Triple A bond rating while other states had their credit downgraded.

This year, I will *again* propose a budget that links state spending to the growth of our economy.

We'll invest one-time money in one-time infrastructure projects.

We'll focus on the future AND rebuild our reserves.



I ask the General Assembly to join me in this effort. If you do, when the next crisis comes, Delaware will be ready again.

This last year has been a very challenging balancing act.

We have worked hard to protect public health, while protecting the health of our economy.

I've told Delawareans time and again -- we need a healthy community AND a healthy economy.

In spite of a global economic downturn and a pandemic, our unemployment rate in Delaware is just over 5% now. That is a positive sign for Delaware workers.

But we know that some have sacrificed more than others.

In March, restaurant workers across our state suffered a serious blow. They faced the sudden loss of a job because of our COVID-19 restrictions.

Restaurant owners worried about the loss of a family-owned business.

The same is true for folks who make their living in bars, hotels, and arts venues.

In many ways, these places are the heart of our communities – and they drive our \$3.5 billion tourism industry.

That's why our state was one of the first states to step up and support them.

On March 18th, we launched our HELP program to offer financial relief to these businesses and their workers.

Over the course of the pandemic, Delaware has used nearly \$200 million in federal CARES Act funding to support restaurants, bars, hotels, gyms and other small businesses.



We've used another \$210 million to replenish the state's Unemployment Insurance Trust Fund. This will protect small businesses from a tax hike in the future that otherwise would be necessary.

We will continue to support these small businesses until they're back on their feet.

Last year, despite the pandemic, we continued to fund the largest infrastructure program in the history of our state.

In Kent and Sussex counties, we have made it a priority to expand access to high-speed broadband and eliminate internet deserts.

In the past year, we expanded wireless broadband to over 500 Delawareans. That number continues to grow each week.

During the pandemic, this work became more important than ever.

The Department of Education and DTI partnered to create the Connect Delaware program.

Through this program, we provided over 25,000 low-income students with reliable internet access.

And I want to thank Jason Clarke, our new Chief Information Officer, and his team for their hard work on this broadband initiative.

In July, we all put on our masks, and opened the Margaret Rose Henry Bridge in South Wilmington.

The bridge connects the Riverfront with development opportunities on the other side of the Christina. It will also serve as an important connector for city neighborhoods. And as a welcoming symbol for visitors to our City.

It is appropriately named for our good friend, former Senator, and a bridge-builder herself, Margaret Rose Henry.

These are the kind of projects that can revitalize communities, create jobs, spur growth, and new business investment.



We need to make it easy for businesses to start here, and stay here. That's why this year, I'm again proposing a Site Readiness Fund, so we can quickly convert existing properties to meet the needs of prospective employers.

Two years ago, we started a new grant program: Encouraging Development and Growth Expansion, or EDGE for short.

We've awarded nearly \$1.5 million in EDGE Grants to 20 companies.

This year we'll expand the EDGE grant program, to encourage even more small businesses to grow and innovate.

We'll also increase funding for what we call Graduation Lab Space. We have a number of start-up science and tech companies here in Delaware. But we have a shortage of lab space for them to use as they grow their business.

We want to help the private sector build more lab space.

We want companies that start here to stay and grow here.

And we want to attract companies from the region to come to our state.

We know that the best path to a good job is a good education.

This past year has tested every aspect of our public school system. And I want to thank our educators, school nurses, school and district leaders, and every single person who works in our schools. They have met this challenge, and put the needs of their students above their own.

I also want to thank the parents, who filled in the gaps and kept their students on track at home, often while juggling remote work of their own.

My highest priority as Governor remains the same. We need to ensure our most vulnerable students get the education they need and deserve. Students who are living in poverty. Students who are still learning English.

And I know it's a priority for many of you.



That's why we created the Opportunity Funding program – Delaware's first weighted student funding system. We designed the program to offer classroom-based support for low-income students and English learners. And for the educators who work so hard with these students every day.

Over the next three years, we will more than double Opportunity Funding for public schools across the state.

Already, Opportunity Funding is making a difference for our most vulnerable students.

In the Indian River district, this program paid for additional staff to help English learners at every grade level.

In the Capital School District, social workers and school counselors are supporting the social and emotional needs of students. They're working to ensure we meet the needs of the whole child.

In the Red Clay district, Opportunity Funding is providing new staff, new materials, and new programs for low-income students and English learners.

One of the best ways to help these students is to support them before they even start school. That's why we'll also double funding for the Early Childhood Assistance Program in future years. This will expand access to high quality early education programs for disadvantaged children.

We're also committed to fully funding K-3 basic special education over the next few years. I want to personally thank Representative Williams for her years of advocacy on this issue.

We will need the General Assembly's support to make all of these investments a permanent reality. Our students deserve nothing less.

I want to take a minute to thank my wife Tracey for her particular focus on the children who need our help the most.

She and her team through the First Chance Initiative have helped to make Delaware a more trauma-informed state. They've helped ensure students were fed even when the pandemic meant they couldn't come to school. And through the Dolly Parton Imagination Library, over 13,000 children from birth to age five



receive a new book in the mail every month. The First Chance Initiative has been recognized nationally by the Casey Family Programs with the Excellence for Children Leadership award, and the initiative has been critical to our work here in Delaware.

Thank you, Tracey, for your dedication to giving every Delaware child a First Chance to succeed.

I also want to thank Lieutenant Governor Hall-Long for her work as Chair of the Behavioral Health Consortium. She and her team continue to break down the stigma of substance use disorder and mental health challenges. They're providing families with resources and support. And they're distributing the life-saving drug, naloxone, to prevent overdose deaths.

During the COVID crisis, the Lieutenant Governor also led the effort to support homeless Delawareans. She organized volunteers and went out on the street, herself, in full PPE to screen and test and then quarantine those who needed it.

This year laid bare the pain that our brothers and sisters of color suffer across our state and nation. It took away any false sense of comfort we may have allowed ourselves to feel that everyone has equal access to the American Dream.

We have much work to do as a state and as a nation. First to heal. But to go beyond healing. To make fundamental changes to a system that for too long has denied the promise of equality and justice for all.

This requires a comprehensive approach. To the relationship between law enforcement and communities of color. But also to economic empowerment, education, and issues of diversity and inclusion in the workplace.

I recently named former Secretary of Human Resources Sandy Johnson as the Director of Statewide Equity Initiatives – a new position designed to make sure that we in state government are leading the way. We've also worked hard to build a cabinet that looks like Delaware. We created the position of Chief Diversity Officer to focus on recruitment and retention of a diverse state workforce.

I also want to congratulate the General Assembly. Led by Senator Darius Brown, they're one step away from a Constitutional amendment that will make it clear that



here in Delaware, discrimination on the basis of race, color or national origin is illegal, and will not be tolerated.

There are also very concrete things we can do to ensure that our brothers and sisters of color have a fair shot at the American dream.

The Port of Wilmington is one of a handful of ports in the country with a predominantly African American workforce. Now we're building a new port at Edgemoor. This will create thousands of additional good-paying jobs.

African American-owned businesses make up 11 percent of businesses in our state. They make up 16 percent of the businesses that got COVID Relief Grants from the state.

We're also using CARES Act money to put 3,000 out-of-work Delawareans through a rapid retraining program to get them back on their feet. Over half of enrollees are people of color.

Last year, led by Senator Lockman and Representative Chukwuocha, we banned choke holds. This year, we will support a plan to get body cameras for every police officer in the state.

There is so much more work to be done, but we have made important progress this year.

A critical part of making life better for Delawareans is protecting our environment.

Last year, the legislative session was interrupted by the COVID-19 pandemic, as we know. But I made a promise to my friend, and former Senator Harris McDowell.

I promised we would put the finishing touch on his legacy here in the legislature and set a Renewable Portfolio Standard this year.

And so with your help, we will set a new goal that 40 percent of Delaware's energy will come from renewable sources by 2035.

We made a lot of promises before the pandemic last year. And I intend to keep them.



We'll again propose a \$50 million investment in a new Clean Water Trust Fund. We will make sure that all Delaware families have access to clean drinking water.

And we will place a special focus on those hard-to-serve communities across our state.

Delaware's constitution and our oaths of office call on us to protect these natural resources for future generations.

With the leadership of House Majority Leader Longhurst and Senate Majority Leader Townsend, the Delaware Nature Society and so many others -- we will do just that.

Of course, we can't do any of the things I just mentioned unless we beat this pandemic.

To date, 1,049 Delawareans have died of the deadly virus. Each one was a precious life, with family and friends.

More than 7 percent of our population has been infected with COVID-19. The virus is real. And it's very serious.

Last spring, I asked Lt. Governor Hall-Long and Secretary of State Bullock to lead our Pandemic Resurgence Advisory Committee. They listened to the firsthand accounts of Delawareans affected by COVID-19. They helped us develop a plan to protect our health and support our economy.

Over the course of my 30 years in public service, and even during the course of this administration, I have seen government tackle countless, serious and complicated challenges.

Nothing – absolutely nothing – compares to the last ten months.

There are state employees in every corner of this government who have been asked to solve unimaginable problems, work punishing hours, and put themselves in harm's way, to help us get through this pandemic.



And so, to the nurses and the team at the Veterans Home, the Psychiatric Center, the Home for the Chronically Ill, Stockley, and hospitals throughout the state.

To the correctional officers, probation and parole, and youth rehabilitation staff.

To the educators and school nurses.

To the child care providers who have supported our youngest learners throughout the pandemic.

To the unemployment office at the Department of Labor.

To the Delaware State Police, DATE, DNREC park rangers and the Attorney General's Office.

To the Department of Elections.

To the restaurant inspectors and the team at the State Health Operations Center.

To DEMA and the Delaware National Guard.

To the entire team at the Division of Public Health.

Thank you. Thank you. Thank you so much.

Most Delawareans will never know all that you've done and sacrificed to keep them safe. But I know. And I am grateful.

This time last year, most of us had never heard of the novel coronavirus.

Today, we're testing 200,000 Delawareans a month.

We've processed unemployment claims for 120,000 Delaware workers.

We've allocated more than \$900 million in CARES Act funding.

And we've administered nearly 70,000 life-saving vaccines.



There is a long long road ahead of us. But we have turned the corner. Thank you, Delawareans, for doing your part.

One of the most important things we did during this pandemic was safeguard our democracy.

With the General Assembly's help, we allowed mail-in voting for the first time. That meant hundreds of thousands of Delawareans could stay safe from the pandemic, while exercising their right to vote. And I look forward to signing legislation to make mail-in voting a permanent feature of our elections – from school board and town hall elections to the election for the President of the United States.

Governments at all levels made it possible for public meetings, hearings and proceedings to be conducted virtually during the pandemic. In many cases it's made conducting the public's business more accessible, more transparent, and more efficient.

We should **all** want **more** people to participate in our democracy – not fewer. So we should work together to make these practices permanent even after the pandemic.

This year has taken a toll on each of us. And our state has had to withstand enormous pressure and strain.

But we as a state have survived. We've proven that if we each do our part, together, we can get through this.

Hope is here. We're getting the vaccine to as many Delawareans, as fast as we can. And we have a new President who we all know so well, and we know we can trust.

We will get through this. And with your help, in this next year, we will thrive.

The pandemic has affected each of us differently. But it's affected each of us one way or another. We all have that in common.

For me, it's made me even more grateful to live in a state of neighbors.

To have a state workforce full of grit and compassion.



And to have the privilege of leading nearly a million Delawareans who have looked out for one another, who have done the right thing, and who have kept the faith that better days are just on the horizon.

Thank you, God bless you, and God bless our great state.