

Ohio's Kasich Touts Education, Broadband In Speech

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Ohio Governor John Kasich / (Photo by Chip Somodevilla/Getty Images)

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STEBENVILLE, Ohio (AP) — Ohio Gov. John Kasich announced a plan to boost broadband network speeds, introduced an award honoring courageous Ohioans and said shale drilling shouldn't come at the expense of the environment in an annual State of the State speech mostly devoid of big initiatives.

Kasich spoke for nearly 90 minutes in a rambling, unfocused address in the auditorium of a high-performing elementary school in Steubenville, picking a blue-collar town he said

reminded him of his Pennsylvania hometown to take the speech outside Columbus for the first time in history.

He said Ohio has come far from a year ago when it faced an estimated \$8 billion budget hole and was ranked 48th nationally in job creation. The state now has money in its Rainy Day Fund once again and is the top job-creator in the Midwest, he said.

"We just looked at the problems honestly," said Kasich, a first-term Republican. "If you look at a problem and you see what it is, and you design a solution, it's amazing how far you can go."

The broadband initiative he announced will use new technology to open up the state's technology infrastructure, increasing speeds from 10 gigabits per second to 100. The Ohio Board of Regents said the state will invest \$8.1 million to connect areas around the state with the faster network connections.

He cited the broadband upgrade, aerospace breakthroughs taking place at Wright-Patterson Air Force Base in Dayton, and collaborative research and development efforts in higher education as among avenues for economic growth.

“If we can train, educate, forecast, use our location, use our great people, use our resource, our assets, we’ll be number one in America, we’ll be the most powerful state in America,” he said. “I have no doubt. We have the scale, the size, and everything that we need.”

Kasich said he has asked Ohio State University President E. Gordon Gee to lead an effort among universities to dovetail resources and come up with ways to increase the state’s college graduation rates.

After the speech, Gee said university leaders are set to meet with the governor in a week to discuss their proposal.

“In the end, we’ve got to start thinking about Ohio and Ohio higher education as an ecological system, not as a series of speedboats out there racing around each other,” Gee said.

Sen. Mike Skindell, a Cleveland-area Democrat, said that while he supports collaboration among the universities, he questioned Gee’s role.

“To have the president of Ohio State lead that effort is kind of self-serving,” Skindell said.

Kasich’s new “Governor’s Courage Awards” honored a woman who lost her son to prescription painkiller addiction, another woman who survived being a victim of human trafficking to become a social worker, and the family of a soldier killed in Afghanistan.

The governor touted progress in his war on prescription painkiller abuse and received a standing ovation when he said he would declare a similar war on behalf of 1,000 Ohio teenagers who have been co-opted into prostitution.

He also said the state needs to allow felons who have served their time to work certain jobs such as cutting hair or driving trucks that are currently off-limits.

State Sen. Bill Seitz, a Cincinnati Republican, said he supports the so-called collateral sanctions proposal — one of the few legislative initiatives he heard in the speech.

He called it “an uplifting and accurate recitation” of Kasich’s first-year accomplishments and Ohio’s assets.

“Where I thought it was a little short, unlike traditional State of the State speeches, was on any specific legislative agenda that he wants us to pursue,” Seitz said.

A handful of protesters, likely admitted to the speech on public tickets

Kasich distributed through an online lottery, temporarily interrupted the speech about an hour and 10 minutes into it — shouting “John Kasich is selling out Ohio!”

The ruckus came as Kasich was talking about drilling for natural gas in eastern Ohio.

He said large energy companies flocking to the state amid the Marcellus and Utica shale boom don't want to leave the state harmed. “We can't degrade the environment at the same time we're developing this industry,” Kasich said.

Outside the school, which shares Steubenville High School, more than 100 demonstrators gathered — some to oppose the use of hydraulic fracturing, or fracking, to reach shale oil and gas resources. One sign read, “Frack Off Kasich.” Others demonstrated in support of the Occupy movement.

State Rep. Bob Hagan, a Youngstown Democrat whose area has experienced earthquakes a state seismologist says are tied to deep injection disposal of fracking wastewater, spent \$800 in campaign money to bus in about 50 of the protesters.

But he said he wants to work with Kasich on the issue.

“Well, if he wants to do it safely then let's get together,” he said. “Let's get to the Legislature where these bill are passed to make sure it's safe.” He noted that bills ordered a statewide drilling moratorium and disclosure of fracking chemicals are stalled.

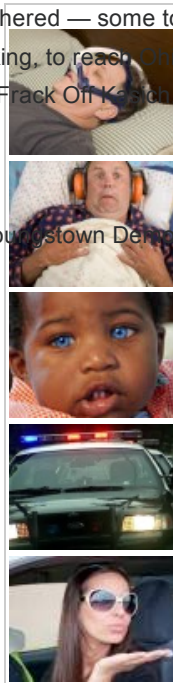
Shane Hanley, 47, a locked-out worker with Cooper Tire & Rubber Co. and member of the steelworker's union, drove the 3.5 hours to Steubenville from Findlay.

He and four others came to let Kasich know a bitter collective bargaining fight — in which voters turned back a bill limiting the rights of unionized public workers — would not be forgotten.

“The union movement ain't going away and don't forget that.”

The day's speech was peppered with Kasich's usual array of off-the-cuff, sometimes puzzling remarks. He at one point said he “never looked back” when he left politics, presumably referring to his time in Congress. He was elected as a Republican governor in 2010.

He also referred to people in California as “wackadoodles.” And he had no sooner told the emotional stories of his first two courage



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award winners than he added, “We don’t want to see those on eBay, ladies.”

Moving the speech was a chance for Kasich, whose approval rating with voters is under 40 percent, to reconnect with voters after the collective bargaining debate. Ahead of the address, he enjoyed handshakes with guests and congratulations from supporters for a job well done.

On Monday, Ohio Democratic Party Chairman Chris Redfern predicted “an extended speech with little in the way of nouns, adverbs, subjects and predicates.”

Redfern assembled reporters ahead of the speech to tout the role he says was played by President Barack Obama, U.S. Sen. Sherrod Brown and other Democrats in the jobs recovery — particular in the automotive industry — that he correctly predicted Kasich would highlight.

Ohio unemployment fell to 8.1 in December, down from 8.5 in November and from 9.5 in December 2010.

Kasich said he’s hearing from businesses that are excited to invest in Ohio again.

“We’re alive again. We’re out of the ditch. We’re growing,” he said.

Redfern criticized Kasich’s promotion of a Bob Evans Restaurants expansion last year that relocated the company from Columbus to neighboring New Albany.

“It’s not about moving Bob Evans across town,” he said. “It’s about investing in American automobile jobs that help real communities like Defiance in a tangible, trackable, empirical way.”

Online:

Ohio Gov. John Kasich: <http://www.governor.ohio.gov>

Associated Press writers Andrew Welsh-Huggins in Columbus and Ann Sanner in Steubenville contributed to this report.

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