



Dan Walters: Governor rolling out big agenda

By Dan Walters - Bee Columnist

Published 12:00 am PST Wednesday, January 10, 2007

Fresh off his landslide re-election, Arnold Schwarzenegger is rolling out the most audaciously ambitious agenda of any California governor in decades, bluntly challenging voters and lawmakers to confront many of the knottiest issues bedeviling a fast-growing and fast-changing state.

While one might quibble with some of the specifics of that agenda -- an overreliance on debt to finance public works, perhaps -- one cannot fault Schwarzenegger for eschewing the incrementalism that recent governors exhibited and bluntly telling Californians that they face growing problems "that have been ignored for decades" and need big solutions.

He delivered his latest of several such messages Tuesday in his State of the State address to lawmakers, calling for tens of billions in new bonds to expand the massive infrastructure program that he, the Legislature and voters approved last year -- including highly controversial water storage projects -- labeling the prison system a "powder keg" that will explode unless overhauled, expanding pioneering policies to curb global warming with cleaner-burning fuels, proposing new investment in education, reiterating his call for universal health care, and demanding anew that legislative redistricting be reformed so government can become more responsive.

Schwarzenegger is a nominal Republican but with his series of second-term pronouncements has moved further away from GOP orthodoxy, espousing a "new centrism" and excoriating the Republican-dominated federal government for being "paralyzed

by gridlock and games" and wasting public works funds in "a porkfest ... with all the earmarks and the backroom deals. ..."

He envisions the "nation-state" of California pointing the way to a more collegial political atmosphere that will tackle tough issues that will affect the state's future and "show the nation and the world how to get there."

"We are not waiting for our problems to get worse," Schwarzenegger told lawmakers. "We're not waiting for the federal government. We are not waiting -- period. Because the future does not wait."

Schwarzenegger's agenda is so meaty that any one of its many specifics could easily dominate a legislative session, so the natural question is whether -- given the Capitol's rather shabby record of response to California's socioeconomic reality -- it has any hope of being enacted.

The governor points to last year's cooperation with Democrats on infrastructure bonds, global warming and other issues as a model for this year, calling on lawmakers to "continue the climb we began last year" up the "mountain called the future." But those were largely Democratic issues, and several items on his new agenda are favored by Republicans, such as building more reservoirs and prisons and tightening up on welfare, but stoutly opposed by Democrats. In fact, Democrats successfully insisted on slashing prison and water construction from last year's deal.

Schwarzenegger went along with the Democrats last year because he needed a record of accomplishment to run for re-election after suffering a serious setback at the hands of voters in 2005 and seeing his popularity plummet. With his popularity once again high and a landslide re-election under his belt, Schwarzenegger begins this year in a stronger political position and could conceivably be tougher with Democrats on water, prison construction and other issues they would prefer to shun, even as he deals with balky Republicans on health care and other issues they don't embrace.

If the "new centrism" is to mean anything more than a buzzword phrase in a speech, Schwarzenegger must find a way to cut through the Capitol's ideological polarization, perhaps by using his newly recaptured popularity to enlist the larger public.
