



Daniel Weintraub: Governor, in a hurry, walks political tight rope

By Daniel Weintraub -

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Whatever you think of Gov. Arnold Schwarzenegger, don't call him an incrementalist. He lives large and plays hard. And while he is fixated on the future, he sometimes seems to govern as if he thinks there is no tomorrow.

At the moment, he's getting out ahead of lawmakers in the Capitol -- from both parties.

Schwarzenegger used his State of the State speech Tuesday night to lay out plans for health care, infrastructure and environmental policy that would put or keep California on the cutting edge on all three issues.

The tie that binds his approach on those fronts is action. He can't stand sitting back and waiting for things to happen. Or taking them step-by-step. He wants to do it all. Now.

"We are not waiting for politics," Schwarzenegger told a joint session of the Legislature. "We are not waiting for our problems to get worse. We are not waiting for the federal government. We are not waiting -- period. Because the future does not wait."

After taking a drubbing at the polls in the special election he called in 2005, Schwarzenegger admitted that he had been impatient, and that his restlessness had led him to issue an ultimatum to the Legislature to pass his program or else. He apologized for trying to move too far, too fast.

But he never really did slow down. He just chose different issues. Instead of political and fiscal reform, he shifted his focus to policy, and mostly to policy that the Democrats who control the Legislature could go along with: infrastructure, global warming, minimum wage.

Now, with a landslide re-election victory in his hip pocket, Schwarzenegger is back, and his agenda is bigger than ever. He may be smiling, but he is also confronting lawmakers with some proposals that will make them uneasy.

He wants to build dams and expand the state's water storage. He wants to build more prisons and overhaul the state's sentencing laws. He wants to

build still more roads, more schools, more university buildings, more courthouses. All together, he is proposing another \$43 billion in public works bonds, most of which would go on the ballot in 2008 and 2010.

But unlike last year, when Democrats helped write and pass a \$37 billion public works plan, this package will face a tougher road to approval. Democrats don't like dams and prisons. Republicans have just about had their fill of borrowing to build schools. To get the two-thirds votes he will need in the Legislature to place those bonds on the ballot, the governor will have to get all sides to vote for things they oppose.

Then there is his health care plan. Schwarzenegger was uncharacteristically cautious on this issue in his first term, but now he has caught the bug. He wants to require all Californians to have insurance and require employers of more than 10 workers to help pay for it, while taxing doctors and hospitals and tapping the federal government for more money to subsidize those who can't afford it. His proposal would make California a leader in health care reform.

Republicans are already questioning the plan because it relies on taxes (Schwarzenegger calls them "fees") and mandates. Some Democrats, stunned by the breadth of the governor's proposal, are suggesting that maybe the state should start with guaranteeing coverage for all children, while deferring the rest of it. To pass his plan or anything like it, Schwarzenegger is going to have to get some powerful interests -- doctors, hospitals, employers, insurers -- to lay down their political weapons and take a hit for what he says is the greater good.

"In the past," Schwarzenegger said, "health care reform was always dead on arrival. But this year you can feel something different in the air. I can feel the energy, the momentum, the desire for action. You can feel that the time is right. ... California is going to lead the nation in breaking new ground to meet the health care needs of its people."

On the environment, Schwarzenegger is back with a new step in his battle against global warming, one that won't require legislative approval. He has ordered his air quality bureaucracy to begin a discussion on rules that would reduce the amount of carbon in automotive fuels by 10 percent, and he wants the regulators to include a provision that would allow refiners to use a market-based system to accomplish his goal.

"Let us blaze the way, for the U.S., for China and for the rest of the world," Schwarzenegger told the Legislature. "Our cars have been running on dirty fuel for too long. Our country has been dependent on foreign oil for too long. I ask you to set in motion the means to free ourselves from oil and from OPEC. I ask you to encourage the free market to overthrow the old order. California has the muscle to bring about such change. I say use it."

This, apparently, is what Schwarzenegger means by post-partisan. His plans are a mix of right and left, Republican and Democrat. They are in some cases risky. But they are never dull.
