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Corzine Offers Himself as Remedy for Fiscal Health

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TRENTON

IN his State of the State address to lawmakers in Trenton last week, Gov. [Jon S. Corzine](#) avoided the broad promises and sweeping initiatives that are the hallmarks of the annual rite.

Instead, Mr. Corzine outlined what could only be a major theme of his re-election campaign this year, which is that he is the candidate prepared to make the tough decisions to help the state ride out this economic storm.

Mr. Corzine's supporters say the theme is appropriate given the economic anxiety causing so much concern among New Jersey residents as the unemployment number rises and portfolios continue to decline. It is also a message to remind them of the governor's financial management credentials as he embarks on a re-election campaign, possibly against a popular opponent known largely for his success in jailing corrupt politicians.

"I think he was setting it up for making sure people know what he has accomplished," said Ingrid Reed, of the Eagleton Institute of Politics at [Rutgers University](#). "He said: 'Look, I've been governing for three years, we've made real strides. I've been on the job.' "

In contrast to the typical State of the State address, which often presents a governor's top initiatives and strategy for the coming year, Mr. Corzine focused on past accomplishments in his address and used it to sound warnings of the tough times ahead.

One section of the address was simply a list of 11 accomplishments from Mr. Corzine's three years in office. The rest were constant reminders of how tough times will be.

The governor's Democratic supporters said it was not surprising that Mr. Corzine would forgo any bold, and potentially costly, initiatives in a year that has already featured a \$1.7 billion slide in tax revenues, home foreclosures and rising unemployment.

"How can you discuss big initiatives when this year's budget is \$2 billion in the hole?" asked [Richard Codey](#), the Senate president and an Essex County Democrat.

In his speech, Mr. Corzine also touted his efforts at fiscal reform, making special mention of the elimination of special Legislative "Christmas tree" grants in the annual state budget.

The abuse of those grants featured prominently in the high-profile prosecution of Wayne Bryant, a former state senator from Camden County, on corruption charges two months ago. The charges were brought by the office of

the former United States attorney for New Jersey, [Christopher J. Christie](#), a Republican who recently filed to be a candidate for governor. Many Republicans in the state believe that Mr. Christie, who racked up a reputation as a tough crime fighter, will present Mr. Corzine's toughest challenge.

"I think it was very much a campaign speech, full of 'Look at all our great work,' " said Tom Wilson, the chairman of the Republican State Committee.

"I think he's very cognizant of Chris's credentials, and whenever he gets an opportunity to say 'hey, I'm a good guy too,' which isn't very often, he's going to highlight it," he said.

Another Republican candidate for governor, Assemblyman Richard A. Merkt, of Morris County, was in the audience for the State of the State address and said Mr. Corzine's remarks lacked substance.

"He still hasn't projected a vision for New Jersey that's credible," he said.

Assemblyman Alex DeCroce, the Republican minority leader of the Assembly, derided the speech. "Middle-class families don't need a pep talk," said Mr. DeCroce, a Morris County Republican. "It won't put bread on their table or put a roof over their heads."

Senator Barbara Buono, a Middlesex County Democrat who is chairwoman of the Senate Budget and Appropriations Committee, said Mr. Corzine's message of confidence and support spoke to the personal anxiety that is gripping her constituents.

"His speech reflects the reality of the fiscal turmoil we're in," she said. "The fact that people are still panicked about the impact this financial crisis has."

It did not take long for Mr. Corzine to see the pitfalls that await as he tries to administer his prescription for fiscal health in a campaign season.

At a meeting of the Assembly Budget Committee on Thursday, Republicans unanimously opposed a measure that would let Mr. Corzine postpone his budget presentation until March 12, a three-week delay the administration hopes will let it know how much relief it may get from a new federal stimulus plan.

The measure passed 8 to 4 on a straight party-line vote, prompting Assemblyman Joseph Cryan, a committee member who is also chairman of the state Democratic Committee, to remark, "I guess you can tell what kind of a year it's going to be."

Mr. Corzine reminded lawmakers two days earlier as he wound down his somber assessment of the state of the state: "We don't choose the circumstances in which we govern. But let me repeat, my first priority, my second priority and my third priority is to get our state through these challenging economic times."