

Christie proposes increased aid to higher education

By Mary Diduch and Jovelle Tamayo / Staff Writers | Posted: Wednesday, February 22, 2012 12:00 am

Gov. Chris Christie outlined his third annual budget address for the next fiscal year — with the intent to make New Jersey have an economic “comeback” with tax cuts and increased funding for certain government entities, like higher education.

The governor’s budget proposal — announced yesterday afternoon at the State House in Trenton — calls for a total of \$32.15 billion for the fiscal year ending June 30, 2013. His proposal represents a 3.7 percent increase in government spending from last year.

“To the millions of New Jerseyans who gave both to our state — I am in your debt. To those who have yet to give, there is good news. It is not too late because the ‘New Jersey Comeback’ has just begun,” the governor said.

One area that Christie plans to funnel funding into is higher education. In his address, he announced a proposed 6 percent increase in direct aid to public colleges and universities.

“Some [New Jerseyans] will say the governor is against teachers or the school system, but this shows he’s really dedicated and wants to reform it,” said Connor Montferrat, the president of the Rutgers College Republicans.

More specifically, Christie’s plan asks for an increase of more than \$28.4 million from last year in student financial assistance. A majority of this would be a 10 percent increase in funds for tuition aid grants, Christie said.

The governor’s proposal also calls for \$1 million toward the new Governor’s Urban Scholarship Program, which would assist students in the state’s inner cities go to college.

“In our society, education is the key to advancement. More attainment in education is the path to more earnings and success in life. And a highly educated work force is a key to New Jersey’s competitiveness,” Christie said.

Ruth Mandel, the director of the University’s Eagleton Institute of Politics, said Christie has always said he would invest in education at all levels once it is possible economically.

Mandel said the 6 percent increase in direct aid to institutes of higher education would be important for student support, like Tuition Aid Grants and students in the Education Opportunity Fund.

She said she hopes there one day will be enough resources for major investments in higher education and new programs.

“[Christie] claims the state is moving forward, but it looks as if it’s still in low gear. ... The funding for the universities is back to being flat [and] there are no cuts, but [also] no major increases for building new programs,” Mandel said.

Aside from increases to higher education investment, Christie proposed tax cuts yesterday for all N.J. citizens.

His plan calls for an across-the-board, 10 percent income tax cut in the first year of the three-year plan and an increasing Earned Income Tax Credit for the working poor to 25 percent from 20 percent — providing about an extra \$500 a year.

In the eight years prior to his election, Christie said New Jersey has raised state taxes and fees 115 times.

“The people of New Jersey have suffered for too long under the burden of high taxes. It is time for real relief,” the governor said.

Christie said he hopes this cut keeps wealthy businesses from leaving the region and helps middle-class families. He also vowed yesterday to veto any tax increase.

He did not propose a property tax cut.

Mandel said with this budget proposal, the governor is trying to show that there has been growth, but there is more to do.

“And therefore, he can present a budget that represents some growth since last year, and that it’s time to give the people a tax cut,” she said.

But while Christie, a Republican, favors an income tax cut, the Democrats — who rule the Legislature — favor a property tax cut, Mandel said.

“The Democrats have made it very clear in their response to the governor’s message that they believe he is calling for the wrong tax cut,” she said.

Mandel said past Rutgers-Eagleton polls have shown that N.J. citizens prefer a property tax cut.

“For many, many years, if you ask New Jersey voters what’s wrong, they’ll say ‘My property taxes are too high.’ If you ask New Jersey voters what they want from their leaders, they will say ‘We want our property taxes cut,’” she said.

Property taxes have always been a big issue in New Jersey because we have some of the highest property taxes in the nation, said Daniel Pereira, the vice president of the Rutgers University Democrats.

“He’s talking about tax cuts across the board but at the end of the day, they benefit the wealthy more than they benefit middle class,” he said.

In his speech yesterday, Christie also discussed an initiative he addressed in his “State of the State” at the beginning of the year — that non-violent drug offenders would receive a mandatory treatment instead of a prison sentence.

In his budget, the governor included \$2.5 million to create a mandatory drug court for nonviolent offenders.

“It is the first step toward reclaiming these lives and treating drug addiction for what it really is — a disease that can be conquered, but only with effective treatment,” Christie said.

The Legislature will review Christie’s proposal and the budget over the next several months, create additional proposals, and negotiate and present a final, balanced budget to the governor by their June 30 deadline, Mandel said.

“Strong leadership will help New Jersey get out of its financial problems but I don’t think we’ve actually seen it so far,” said Pereira, a School of Arts and Sciences senior. “I was impressed with his speech — it was good politics and good discussion. But in the end of the day, his budget’s not going to help the people who desperately need it: the middle class and the working poor.”

Montferrat, a School of Arts and Sciences senior, said because of the governor’s work on the budget, the state could now increase aid in areas including hospitals, schooling and higher education.

“[Christie] doesn’t even have to campaign in 2013 because of how much he’ll be helping New Jersey with this budget if [the Legislature] passes it,” he said. “I don’t see why they wouldn’t.”