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Cuomo to Give State of the State Address and Outline His Budget

By Jesse McKinley

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ALBANY — In a simultaneous assertion of legislative goals and a bid for the dollars to pay for them, Gov. Andrew M. Cuomo of New York is to deliver his State of the State address and present his proposed budget for the coming year on Wednesday, providing greater definition to an agenda that he has already largely outlined.

The governor has used the better part of the past week to roll out what he is calling an "opportunity agenda" for 2015, including in it initiatives covering areas like controlling property taxes, creating jobs and improving infrastructure.

But beginning with an ambitious second inaugural address, Mr. Cuomo, a Democrat, has also signaled a willingness to confront more intractable social concerns like wage inequality and criminal justice.

In a departure from custom, Mr. Cuomo's State of the State oration, originally scheduled for the Jan. 7 opening of the legislative session, was postponed because of the death of his father, former Gov. Mario M. Cuomo, on New Year's Day.

Mr. Cuomo has made much of his fiscal discipline in the past, and will probably do so in his budget presentation on Wednesday. That said, he has already trumpeted several new big-ticket plans for the coming year, including a $1.5 billion grant competition upstate, a $1 billion broadband project for rural regions and a $450 million proposal he made on Tuesday to build a 1.5-mile rail link connecting New York City's subways and the Long Island Rail Road to La Guardia Airport.

The state budget for the year ending March 31 is $142 billion, according to the state comptroller's office. And fiscal experts said it could be a challenge for Mr. Cuomo, who has touted a surplus and billions of dollars in proceeds from settlements with Wall Street institutions, to keep within his self-imposed spending limit – 2 percent a year — particularly with looming increases in school aid and Medicaid expenses.

"How he makes the numbers square up is an interesting question," said Elizabeth Lynam, the director of state studies for the Citizens Budget Commission. "It's going to be harder and harder to keep that spending rate down," she added, in part because the state is doing better.

"He needs to keep the discipline going," Ms. Lynam said. "Or we'll be right back into the deficit condition."

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Mr. Cuomo, who was elected to a second term in November, has trumpeted his success in negotiating four straight on-time budgets. But with a new Republican majority in the State Senate, extending that streak could provide a modicum of suspense.

The speech on Wednesday is also likely to set the stage for several new battles for Mr. Cuomo, including one on education. He has signaled that he will pursue several major initiatives involving evaluations of teachers and an expansion of charter schools that face stiff opposition from the state's powerful teachers' unions.

Mr. Cuomo will also encounter resistance from Republicans in several arenas, including on a proposal he announced on Sunday to increase the minimum wage, to $11.50 in New York City and $10.50 in the rest of the state. Republicans have in the past portrayed minimum-wage increases as onerous to small businesses.

The governor could also face broader opposition in the Democratic-controlled Assembly, as well as the Senate, to a plan he unveiled on Monday for a commission that would place restrictions on the outside pay that members of the Legislature can earn, and that would study, and even possibly raise, lawmakers' salaries.

While the steady stream of announcements about the governor's "opportunity agenda" may have robbed the occasion on Wednesday of some of its excitement, the governor was shrewd to tease out his agenda over the course of several days, said Blair Horner, the legislative director for the New York Public Interest Research Group, a government watchdog group.

But publicity tactics only go so far, Mr. Horner said: "Whether or not the legislature embraces the proposals, who knows?"

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