

Martinez lays out priorities for tough-on-crime session

Written by By Matthew Reichback NM Political Report
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SANTA FE – Gov. Susana Martinez’s regular list of legislative priorities was joined by a number of public safety initiatives that confirmed that this year would be a session with a lot of tough on crime rhetoric.

Martinez, a former prosecutor, spoke about the need to curb crime and spoke about how increased sentencing is the way to do that during her “State of the State” address Jan. 19.

She laid out this and two other issues—education and jobs—as priorities at the top of her speech, which she read off Teleprompters on Tuesday afternoon.

She spoke passionately about the deaths of two police officers while in the line of duty, officers Nigel Benner of Rio Rancho and Dan Webster of Albuquerque. She said “they were heroes to strangers.”

Their widows were in attendance, guests of Martinez.

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Martinez's husband was a police officer as was her father.

Martinez also advocated for increased penalties for repeat offenders on violent crimes. Some media have been focused on these repeat offenders and several high profile incidents have lead to a big amount of pressure to address the situation.

Martinez did not mince words.

"Call them boomerang thugs, turnstile thugs, whatever," she said. "We have vicious, heinous criminals among us who are willing to take the lives of our greatest heroes and who have no business being out on our streets."

She said that "we need laws that are tough in substance, not just in soundbites."

This includes expanding the offenses that would count towards the state's "three-strikes" law that results in a life sentence. She noted that no one has been "incarcerated under that law;" the law went into effect in 1994 and the crimes named in the law have minimum sentences of 15 years.

She also supported a constitutional amendment on bail reform that would, among other things, allow judges to deny bail for those who they deem too dangerous.

Martinez also advocated for stiffening sentences for child pornography, saying she agrees with the Attorney General that legislators should pass laws that allow "multiple counts based on the number of images they have." New Mexico's Attorney General, Hector Balderas, is a popular Democrat.

She also advocated for stiffer penalties for those who have multiple DWIs, which she said would make New Mexico safer.

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She listed the names of four who were recently killed by drunk drivers in high profile accidents.

“Those who repeatedly drive drunk need to face stiffer penalties and so should those who knowingly toss them the keys,” she said.

The 30-day session is known by some as the “budget session” because budget issues are the priority. She recognized that lower energy prices mean that “most agency budgets will have to be held flat.”

She said that this means they would have to prioritize and said that funding public safety should be one of those priorities. This includes money for expanding the amount of police officers.

Other priorities, she said, are expanding funding to hire more caseworkers with the Children, Youth and Families Department, hiring more correctional officers and putting more money towards behavioral health, including community behavioral health clinics.

Ethics also made an appearance in her speech. House Democrats have been pushing hard for ethics legislation since the resignation and conviction of former Secretary of State Dianna Duran, a Republican.

She did not mention an ethics commission, something that good government groups and others have said is the most important step to improve ethics in the state.

In the past, efforts on ethics have failed in the Senate.

Other parts of the address were like a greatest-hits of Martinez’s priorities that have stalled in the Senate.

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She advocated for a change to the state's driver's license law. She supports a bill that would allow those who are not in the country legally to have a driver's privilege card, but not a driver's license. In the past, she has only called for outright repeal to the law that allows those who cannot prove they are in the country legally to get driver's licenses to drive legally.

While she spoke, someone on the Democratic side of the House shouted out. It wasn't clear from the press gallery who it was, whether it was a member or one of the hundreds of guests.

Deborah Martinez said, on Twitter, that someone shouted "Shame on you!"

On other issues, Martinez remained unchanged from past years. She still supports stopping those who cannot read at third-grade level from advancing to the fourth grade.

She called for merit-based pay for teachers ("we should provide our most effective with additional pay") and again repeated her somewhat dubious claim about "inheriting the largest structural deficit in state history." She also repeated the call for right-to-work, saying "we should end the practice of requiring New Mexicans to join a union or give money to one just to have a job."

And she wants to "close the revolving door between legislators and lobbyists."

Another effort—one that her predecessor Bill Richardson also sought—is to reform the capital outlay process.

Still, there were new programs announced beyond increasing penalties for crime.

Martinez called for a program to allow adjunct teachers—that is, teachers who do not have a teaching degree. She said that "we've also reduced time spent on state-mandated testing—and

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it will go down further this year.”

The Public Education Department has had differing statements on how much time is spent testing.

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