

2026 State of the State Address

Media Copy

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Lt. Governor Jones, Speaker Burns, President Pro Tem Walker, Speaker Pro Tem Jones, members of the General Assembly, my fellow Constitutional Officers, Mayor Dickens, members of the judiciary, members of the consular corps, and my fellow Georgians:

As we begin a new year, there are many reasons to be optimistic about the future of our state and its people. State taxes on hardworking Georgians are low and going lower, our rainy day fund is at a record high, our schools are fully funded, our infrastructure is receiving historic investments, and our state law enforcement and educators are paid more today than they were seven years ago.

Our communities are safer; unemployment is low; more new, private sector jobs are being created every day; and businesses around the country and the world know Georgia is the place to be.

Our ports are busy and growing, our kids have some of the finest technical colleges and universities in the country to choose from, and our economy is diverse and built to last.

Innovation, opportunity, hard work, and a fair shot at the American Dream have a home in the great State of Georgia.

There is no question the state of our state is stronger, more prosperous, and safer today than it was in January of 2019. But I want to be clear. This success -- this "good news" -- isn't guaranteed. It doesn't happen by default or accident. There's more work to be done and more wood to chop to make sure Georgia continues to be the best place to live, work, and raise a family for generations to come.

I believe that starts with continuing to address hardworking Georgians' concerns over the persistently high cost of living and everyday necessities. Since 2021, working together with this General Assembly, we have provided one-time tax relief to the tune of over 3.2 billion dollars, property tax relief of nearly 1 billion, over 2.2 billion in motor fuel tax suspensions, and permanent income tax savings of nearly 3.4 billion.

That's almost 9.7 billion dollars that have helped hardworking Georgians fight through the record high inflation forced upon all of us by the previous administration in D.C. and a Congress that couldn't put down the nation's credit card.

These are historic investments in families, recent college graduates looking to start a career, seniors on fixed incomes, and single parents just trying to make ends meet. But these investments were possible because we rejected the idea that just because government takes in more money it should turn right around and spend more of your money to grow more government.

California may think that way, New York may think that way, but in Georgia we do things differently. We keep your tax burden low, we budget conservatively and responsibly and ensure state government is efficient with the dollars you trust us with. And at the end of the day, if we have more than we need, we give it back to the people who actually earned it.

As Marty, the girls, and I travel all across our state we hear from Georgians from all walks of life, hardworking people trying to put food on the table for themselves and their families. And the reality is that too many of our citizens are still struggling to make ends meet and everyday costs are still too high.

Groceries, rent, insurance, clothes for the kids -- it all adds up to more than it used to.

That's why my budget proposal will include a fourth, one-time, 1-billion-dollar tax rebate this year that will return or save the average filer 250 dollars and a married couple up to 500 dollars. With this rebate, my administration and this General Assembly will have returned over 7.5 billion dollars in surplus revenue to the taxpayers of our state over the last four years!

But we also know that one-time relief is a short-term solution that recognizes the state has collected more of your tax dollars than it needs to fund our priorities and save for whatever the future may bring. We must continue doing everything in our power to allow the hardworking men and women of our state to keep more of their hard-earned money in their pocket in the years to come. Because as I've said before: that's your money -- not the government's.

That's why my administration will also be proposing a further 20-basis point reduction in our state's personal and corporate income tax rate, bringing it to just 4.99 percent!

This will be a fulfillment of my promise to the people of Georgia during my re-election campaign to lower our state income tax rate under five percent, and with the General Assembly's passage and my signature it will come a full three years ahead of schedule!

This tax cut doesn't promise to pay for itself years down the road or create future budget holes with today's one-time money. Our plan fulfills my promise to the voters of this state in a responsible way. And most importantly, this plan puts ALL the hardworking people of our state first.

The reason we've been able to do this -- and three years ahead of schedule -- is because of our fiscal discipline. It's also worth noting a few other important accomplishments from the last few years that may not make headlines or please those who constantly advocate for bigger government.

Even with the rebate and tax cuts that my office will be proposing this legislative session, our state's rainy-day fund and strategic reserves will stand at over 10 billion dollars. Those reserves are four times higher than any administration will leave behind in our history -- and enough to run state government for three months.

But I also want to provide a word of caution for the future: it is not a question of if hard times will hit our state again. It is simply a question of when.

When Governors Perdue and Deal were fighting alongside members of the General Assembly to pull our state through the Great Recession, billions more in state reserves would have been a critical lifeline as Georgia families, our state, and our country were experiencing incredible economic hardship.

But as good leaders do, both governors made tough choices in tough times to make sure our state weathered the storm. And they both -- along with members of this legislature who served with them -- deserve our thanks and gratitude for their leadership.

Fast forward to today and Georgia stands in a historic position to confidently face whatever the future may bring. Showing fiscal restraint in continuing to build on these reserves instead of spending it all in the future may not be popular or easy. But the Georgia of today that has been built over the last twenty-five years does not stand on sticks made of "easy," or "politically convenient."

The Georgia of today stands on a firm foundation -- a foundation built on the character of our people, the resolve of leaders both past and present, and by the Grace of our Creator. So,

when the storms of tomorrow come, it is my hope that we will share in a commitment to keeping the state we all love on that firm foundation.

Our state reserves are just one area that we have made historic strides in to set Georgia up for future success and prosperity. From the 2024 budget through the proposed Amended 2026 budget, 4.1 billion dollars in capital projects have been funded through cash instead of debt. This strategic investment will save Georgia taxpayers -- and future state appropriators - 3.3 billion dollars in interest payments over the next 20 years.

The cash-funding of capital projects we began in fiscal year 2024 has allowed us to reduce outstanding debt by over 20 percent in just three years and the ratio of our state's debt service to revenues is just 3 percent, the lowest since the state began issuing debt bonds in the 1970s.

These savings were all made while implementing historic tax cuts, returning billions to taxpayers, and investing over 6 billion dollars in water, sewer, and transportation projects across the state.

Refusing to grow government, budgeting conservatively, and paying off debt aren't flashy. They don't get you on cable news, make you famous on social media, or fit on a bumper sticker, and that might be why Washington is so allergic to them.

But I learned a long time ago building houses that it's better to be a work horse than a show horse. Because work horses deliver results ahead of schedule, under budget, and do right by the customer, and that's exactly what we've done together for the people of our state.

Another key investment this General Assembly and my administration has made is in our state workforce. During my administration, we have reduced our state employee turnover rate by over 25 percent, all while keeping the size of our full-time state workforce at 2019 levels. We've invested in a vital workforce, saved taxpayer dollars in training and equipping new employees, and utilized innovation and technology to better deliver state services.

Our state employees have done incredible work in unprecedented times and are one of the driving forces behind Georgia's success. That's why today, I'm proposing a one-time 2,000-dollar pay supplement for all state employees -- including our educators and state public safety officers.

This is just another reminder -- on top of the pay raises and supplements we have provided in years past -- that their hard work does not go unnoticed and that we are truly thankful.

Let's all give them a hand!

These important investments, tax cuts, rebates, and record state reserves would not be possible without the drive and hard work of millions of Georgians who get up every day and do the best they can to provide for themselves and their families. They go to work chasing the American Dream, hoping to earn an honest living, and leave their kids and grandkids better off than they had it.

That's the American Spirit and the spirit of what it means to be a Georgian.

When I launched my campaign for governor, it was about promising those hardworking Georgians that I would fight for them every day, whether they voted for me or not, regardless of their neighborhood or zip code.

Republican or Democrat or something in between, my goal was to make a positive difference in their lives.

As a small business owner and a construction guy, I believe so much good can come out of an honest day's work at a job that pays a good wage. And I believe in what that job can do for not only that employee, but also their family and their community.

That's why my administration, from day one, has prioritized economic development, job creation, and bringing investment to all four corners of our state. Over the last seven years, Georgia has seen over 219,700 new jobs and more than 118 billion dollars in investment from projects worked by the state economic development team. 64 percent of those jobs and 75 percent of those investment dollars are going to communities outside the metro-Atlanta region.

Since 2019, we've welcomed the three largest economic development projects in state history and continued Georgia's streak as the number one state for business for an unprecedented 12 years in a row. But here in the best state for business, we don't just welcome big companies, we also champion small businesses that have a big impact on communities.

A great example is La Regina -- an Italian food production company with a facility in Alma, Georgia, that employs 110 hardworking men and women. That facility also happens to be a former bakery that went out of business years ago.

To that community of less than 4,000 people, the loss of an employer like that can be devastating. But because we prioritized economic development in rural Georgia, La Regina came in and revitalized that facility and created 110 jobs that are making a real and lasting difference, with more on the way.

The impact of this small business extends far beyond Alma's borders. In addition to moving plenty of goods through the Port of Savannah, La Regina also purchases local produce from over 100 Georgia farmers, including more than 40,000 pounds of onions per week!

With touchpoints throughout that region of our state that one small employer produced a record 25 million jars of pasta sauce last year, alone.

When Marty and I went to southern Italy in 2024, we visited the headquarters of this family-owned and operated business. We talked to the men and women who have preserved their family's recipes for over 100 years, and we saw how similar their values were to the very family-owned farms and businesses here in Georgia that La Regina supports.

That company -- a full ocean away from our state -- has the same values that we do: family, community, and a strong belief in a hard day's work.

Today we're joined by two La Regina company leaders who represent how small-town Georgia and international markets truly connect, all to the benefit of our workers. In the gallery is Emidio Rinaldi, Chief Operating Officer of La Regina who moved his entire family to Georgia. He is joined by Jerry Lady, the plant manager and employee number one for La Regina's Georgia facility. He was also the former bakery manager for the company that closed down.

Will both of you stand and let us recognize you?

Whether the size of the Hyundai Metaplant or the La Regina food processing center, each project, facility, job, or investment represents a generational opportunity for a Georgia family and their community. And one of the biggest reasons these job creators of all sizes choose Georgia is our highly-skilled and reliable workforce.

Over these last seven years, we've put more money toward education and workforce training programs than ever before in our state's history. In fact, as of this current fiscal year, we have not only fully funded QBE seven times but added an additional 368 million dollars to programs and initiatives that directly prepare workers for good jobs.

We've also set new precedents when it comes to school safety, starting with the first year of my administration. We began with three campus security grants totaling over 184.5 million dollars and then added 109 million dollars into the base budget so every school system can plan for how best to keep our classrooms -- and the children in them -- safe.

We will again fulfill that commitment in this year's budget, bringing the total amount we have allocated to school safety during my time in office to over 511 million dollars!

I want to take a moment to also congratulate and thank the members of this body -- both past and present -- who joined my administration in achieving something that not many people thought possible when I was sworn in as governor 7 years ago. In fact, when I pledged in 2018 to raise teacher pay by 5,000 dollars, I remember a former opponent of mine that claimed I was making "false promises" to educators across our state.

Well, in a way, the media and the doubters were right. We didn't raise teacher pay by 5,000 dollars -- we raised it by 9,500 dollars!

This historic investment in our educators increased the starting salary for a Georgia teacher by almost 28 percent. You don't have to get an A in Math to know that's an impressive jump. Let's take a moment to thank all the hardworking Georgians who lead our classrooms, pour into our students, and help make our state a better place.

In addition to K-12, we have also made historic investments in our postsecondary education institutions and programs while reducing costs for students and families. Over the last several years, we have worked together to return the HOPE Scholarship to 100 percent of its promise, all while the Board of Regents has held tuition costs in check across the system so greater opportunity in Georgia can remain affordable.

Contrast that with other states that have again and again raised the cost of higher education, all while inflation reached 40-year highs under the prior administration. The University of California system, for instance, raised tuition by roughly 19 percent between 2019 and the current academic year. But here in Georgia, tuition has increased by just five percent in that same period, and your partnership in eliminating the special institutional fee helped us lessen the impact of those increases on hardworking families and students.

In fact, data from the National Center for Education Statistics shows that Georgia is one of the top states in the country for four-year public university affordability!

And while we've kept the cost of higher education in check and college within reach of Georgia families, we've also invested more in postsecondary education than ever before. We're now putting 2 billion additional dollars toward higher education in Georgia than when I first took office.

That includes 40.7 million dollars in this year's budget proposals, alone, for healthcare education facilities and medical workforce training programs. And since I first took office, we've spent over 26 million dollars for medical residency slots in our state, adding 897 positions for a grand total of 2,523 residency slots as of this fiscal year.

This year, my budget proposal adds another 2.1 million dollars to further this upward trend in such a critical workforce need.

Along with these unprecedented investments, Georgia is truly the national leader in merit-based aid for higher education between the HOPE Scholarship and Grant programs. But in this era of high prices and new challenges for those graduating from high school, we also recognize the advantage need-based financial assistance can give to those who would not otherwise be able to access higher education.

Like their peers who have the means to attend college, these students have great dreams for rewarding careers and impactful lives. But they do not always have hope that those dreams can become reality.

Dreams without the benefit of hope remain dreams deferred, perhaps for entire generations.

How much richer would their lives and those of their families be if they could attain the type of education that leads to a high-paying job with great benefits? And how much would communities across our state benefit from these young people getting a degree that opens a door or starts a rewarding career?

I believe we owe it to every child to ensure they start out on a level playing field, no matter their zip code. Therefore, my Amended budget proposal invests 325 million dollars in the University System of Georgia's DREAMS Scholarship program -- the first need-based scholarship of its kind in Georgia history!

In future years this one-time endowment will create opportunities for generational economic advancement for thousands of students, and down the road it will allow them to complete college and begin meaningful careers without the burden of crippling debt.

The DREAMS Scholarship will build on the incredible, unmatched legacy of the HOPE Scholarship and leave no stone unturned when it comes to student achievement in our state. From now on, throughout the country Americans will know that HOPE and DREAMS are alive and well in Georgia!

This unprecedented initiative will also complement the Georgia MATCH program we launched in 2023. In just the first two years of MATCH, we've seen a 5.9 percent rise in USG enrollment and a 7.1 percent increase in TCSG enrollment. Meanwhile, other states around the country have seen decreases in public university enrollment and seventeen states are still well below pre-pandemic levels.

Not only is Georgia's workforce strong and growing, we'll continue to outpace our competitors for at least another generation in this regard. When you consider all of these measures together, it is clear to see that our commitment to those just beginning their careers in Georgia is unwavering.

But so, too, is our commitment to those preparing to finish careers of valued service to the people of our state -- men and women who face danger on a regular basis to protect our communities.

Marty, the girls, and I feel the weight and value of their service and daily sacrifices on a very real and personal level. We have seen firsthand the uncommon bravery they embody, and we have mourned with their families when their service has come to a tragic end. We have been reminded countless times of just how exceptional they are for answering the call to serve when law enforcement are under siege more than ever before.

That is why today I am proposing an enhanced retirement plan for state law enforcement officers. Under this new model, the state would provide a higher match to the 401(k) savings accounts of eligible public safety officers' through a steeper contribution schedule.

Not only will the state's match increase at a higher rate, we will also raise the maximum percentage cap from 9 percent under the current plan to 15. By year ten of an officer's service to the state -- three full years before they would reach the contribution cap under the current plan -- they will have already attained the new maximum match of 15 percent.

When you contrast that to the current system, we are effectively doubling the state's contribution for state law enforcement.

I believe this is well deserved, given the dangers they face in today's world, but this new model will also help us better recruit and retain brave and capable public safety officers and will put Georgia's law enforcement retirement plan well ahead of other states.

Those who are P.O.S.T. certified, who run toward danger, who help shield even the people who try to vilify them deserve a safe and assured retirement, and we're going to give it to them!

Our commitment to law enforcement in Georgia is matched only by our unrelenting determination to go after those who operate in the evil industry of human trafficking. Thanks to the tireless efforts of the best first lady in the country and the members of the GRACE Commission who are champions in this fight, you have overwhelmingly passed ten pieces of legislation that make Georgia a safe haven for victims and a hostile place for traffickers.

Those measures include the launch of the Human Trafficking Prosecution Unit within Attorney General Chris Carr's Office. Since its creation in 2019, that Unit has secured more than 70 convictions and rescued and assisted over 200 children!

With your help in the legislature, we have also expanded this Unit with two new regional offices through funding in the Amended 2025 and 2026 budgets. I know that our first lady would want me to take this opportunity to thank all of you for your continued support in this fight over the years, whether through legislation or budgetary actions.

While we have made incredible strides in this area, and while Georgia is now the undisputed national leader in anti-human trafficking policy, the fight is not over.

That is why my team will introduce an eleventh bill in the coming days that will further protect children, expose abusers, and save lives by preventing the silence imposed on far too many victims. Modeled after Trey's Law passed in other states, it will be just the latest reminder that no child should be a victim of such evil acts.

As a mother of three beautiful daughters, as someone who spent time as an assistant Pre-K teacher and a middle school substitute teacher, as an unwavering supporter of those in our state's foster care system, and as a first lady who never fails to have a smile and a hug for the children she meets throughout Georgia, Marty has truly been the perfect person to lead this cause to make sure Georgia's sons and daughters are safe.

Her GRACE under fire, along with the work of those who have been in the trenches on this issue for decades, created a turning point in this state when it comes to identifying and stopping this crime that affects every county and hides in plain sight. Though our work here is now in its final year, the impact of her anti-human trafficking efforts -- and that of so many others in this room and beyond -- will be felt for whole generations.

Will you join me in thanking her and all those who have fought this good fight?

Just as we have made historic progress in fighting human trafficking, we've also made monumental strides in going after violent gangs. If you'll recall just a few short years ago, members of the Atlanta media didn't think our state faced a gang problem.

They weren't listening to the sheriffs and prosecutors who were witnessing firsthand the rise of gang-related violent crime in their local community. But the members of this body and my administration were.

In 2019, my office worked with many of you to stand up and fund the Anti-Gang Taskforce within the GBI and then later the Gang Prosecution Unit within the Attorney General's office.

Since then, the GBI has investigated over 1,800 gang-related cases and arrested close to 2,500 offenders with a gang affiliation. They have also seized over 95 million dollars in drugs and other illegal items associated with those crimes. That's 95 million dollars' worth of illegal substances and dangerous weapons that are not in our schools... on our streets... or threatening our neighborhoods.

Complementing the GBI's good work, the Attorney General's Gang Prosecution Unit has also investigated and prosecuted cases in 19 counties, securing over 120 convictions across the state. We're also taking the fight to gang members and other dangerous criminals on the very streets where they operate through the Crime Suppression Unit, now in its fifth year.

With the combined resources and personnel of multiple state public safety agencies partnering with local law enforcement, the CSU has found and arrested 1,340 wanted persons, helped to take dangerous drugs off our streets by arresting 557 traffickers and carriers, recovered 1,179 stolen vehicles, and apprehended 49 murder suspects.

Here's a news flash to those who try to demonize law enforcement: this is what happens when you let them simply do their jobs!

Please join me in thanking the men and women of these units for their dedication to keeping our families and communities safe!

As you all know, this is my final time speaking to you in a State of the State address as your governor. Some of you may be more happy about that than others.

Please know that it has been an incredible honor for Marty, the girls, and me to serve as your First Family. We've done this together every step of the way, and I'd like to take a moment and ask if you'd join me in again recognizing Marty and the girls for their service over the last seven years.

I'd also like to thank my mom, my sister, and her family who are also here today!

Today, I've talked a lot about past accomplishments and some very important issues that I believe we must address in our final legislative session serving together.

Don't be fooled, there's more work to be done over the next 37 legislative days. And for those who may think I'm a lame duck, well, I still have a big red pen!

But seriously, as I was thinking about what to say to my last captive legislative audience, I was reminded of an old hymn, written in 1924 called "Little Is Much When God Is In It."

The first and second verse say the following:

"In the harvest field now ripened
There is a work for all to do
Hark, the Master's voice is calling
To the harvest, calling you.

Does the place you're called to labor
Seem so small and little known?
Well, it is great if God is in it
And He will not forsake His own."

In God's Word, we have so many examples of little acts of faith reaping more than one could imagine, often done by people of lesser means or lower standing in society but filled with God's power and guided by His design.

My family's service to this state will be a small footnote in the history books. Your service under this Gold Dome will likely be the same.

When compared to the heroes of our faith or the everyday actions of so many heroes across our state, our service pales in comparison. Our goal as elected leaders was to do the best we could for the people who sent us here to serve in this building. We worked together to make their communities safer, their dreams more achievable, their lives more prosperous, and their futures a little brighter.

When I put my hand on the Bible that Marty was holding in January of 2019, I didn't know what choices would face us. I didn't know what challenges would come. While the last seven years have seemed so big in our lives -- the many decisions and the outcomes -- the truth is that the budgets, new laws, pandemics, elections, legislative debates, political arguments, at the end of the day, they are small.

They're small when compared to the plan of the Master Builder, our Creator.

But my hope, my prayer, is that God would be in those small things of our service together. Because I believe He can take what we helped build for the people of our state and make it great.

The last verse and chorus of that hymn I mentioned says this:

"And when the conflict here has ended...
And our race on Earth is run
He will say, "If you've been faithful
Welcome home, My child, well done."

Little is much when God is in it
Labor not for wealth or fame
There's a crown, and you can win it
If you go in Jesus' name."

Let's go finish the race.

Like Nehemiah said, let's finish the "great work" we started.

Thank you, may God bless you, and may God continue to bless the great State of Georgia!