



OFFICE OF GOVERNOR
ROY COOPER

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Mr. Speaker, Mr. President Pro Tem, Members of the General Assembly, Council of State, members of the Judiciary, members of my Cabinet, and my fellow North Carolinians: I'm honored to join you tonight to report the state of our great state.

I'm joined by my wife Kristin, my partner in life and in public service, who for the past two years has traveled to every corner of North Carolina. I thank Kristin and our wonderful daughters, Hilary and Natalie, and Claire, who is away at school, for their unwavering love and support. Thank you, guys.

In recent months, North Carolinians have been put to the test. And we've learned we're made of strong stuff.

In September, our state was slammed by Hurricane Florence. Homes, businesses, schools and crops were washed away. Dozens of lives were lost. Then Tropical Storm Michael blew through, bringing more damage.

But adversity only defines us if we refuse to rise and conquer it.

Days after Florence made landfall, I met an elderly woman in a Wilmington shelter who was rescued from floodwaters by first responders. All she had left were the few belongings she had carried in her arms, but she didn't dwell on her loss.

When I told her how sorry I was, she said to me, "I thank God I'm alive, I thank God for that firefighter who rescued me, and I thank God for all these volunteers helping in this shelter—and a lot of them had their own homes flooded. *I'm going to make it.*"



It's that courage in the face of fear, that conviction in the face of uncertainty, that determined spirit in the face of challenges that make us the greatest state in the nation.

That's why tonight, I'm proud to report that the state of our state is determined.

Hurricane Florence showed us that we North Carolinians love our communities, that we help each other, that we're resilient in tough times and that we're determined to work together to rebuild even stronger and smarter.

But the storm showed us it's also time to come together to meet other challenges that people face every day across our state. And we have to bring that same determination to every challenge.

To start, we must come together and insist our public schools come first. We must come together to create opportunities in our cities and our rural communities. We must come together to get health care for hundreds of thousands of working people with no insurance. That's the determination we need to make North Carolina truly excellent.

First, we must be determined to help our state recover stronger and smarter than ever.

It's hard to find a part of our state that has been spared the blows of nature over the past two years, whether floods, rain, wind, tornadoes or mudslides.

In my travels, I've witnessed people's pain and loss, and I've been inspired by their determination. Survivors who are working to rebuild their lives and their communities. Volunteers who served thousands of hot meals and repaired homes. First responders who



pulled more than 5,200 North Carolinians and over a thousand animals from the flood waters.

I've been honored to meet many of these storm heroes, including State Highway Patrol Trooper Nicholas Stoneroad. Just after the storm, he spent hours clearing roads and keeping his community safe. Even though his own home was crushed by fallen trees, he kept right on working.

When he made it back home again, chest-deep floodwaters had destroyed almost everything he owned. But still he kept reporting for duty, protecting others, helping people in need, delivering food to provide meals for survivors. And you know what he said when he was asked why he kept on? He said this: "I had a job to do."

Trooper Stoneroad, your state is deeply grateful to you and to all the people who answered the call to service above self. Please stand so we can thank you and all our hurricane heroes.

Like Trooper Stoneroad, we have a job to do.

We're determined to help North Carolinians recover, and we're making progress.

Local, state and federal leaders are working together. And tens of thousands of North Carolinians are already getting assistance. At our urging, the state and federal government have put in over a billion dollars to help North Carolinians get back on their feet, and we're working for a lot more.

This legislature really stepped up in a big way after Hurricane Florence. We worked together in a bipartisan way to help families, schools, small businesses, fishermen and farmers. But with many small business owners and families just one disaster away from bankruptcy, it's not enough to simply respond to disaster when it



strikes. We must also limit damage from the next storm by rebuilding stronger and more resilient.

Weeks after Hurricane Florence, I formed the new Office of Recovery and Resiliency to carry out recovery and develop strategies to protect our state from future storms.

We've seen violent weather threaten every corner of our state, and scientists agree climate change is making storms and more fierce. It is real. And we're the generation that must act.

In October, I signed an executive order to reduce our state's greenhouse gas emissions 40 percent by 2025.

This won't just help in the fight against climate change—it will boost our economy by creating more clean energy jobs.

We must also be determined to get people better educated for the jobs of today and tomorrow.

When the founders of the University of North Carolina chartered America's first public university to open its doors in 1789, they knew even then that education creates opportunity. Public education lifts up families, communities and our economy.

But too often, public schools have taken a back seat to tax breaks for those at the very top. Simply put, public education is our most important job as a state. We must do better.

When I visit schools across North Carolina, I see determined teachers, I see eager students, and I see hope for our future.

But too often I see teachers working second jobs to make ends meet. Kids who missed out on early childhood education and Pre-



K. Trailers and crowded classrooms. If we want our educators to teach well, we need to treat them well.

Last year, 20,000 teachers from across the state came here to Raleigh and asked us to help our schools. One of them, NaShonda Cooke, is here with us tonight.

The daughter and granddaughter of teachers, NaShonda decided to become one too during a visit to her mother's classroom. NaShonda said this: "I knew immediately. I saw my mom change lives. I saw her help children reach their highest potential."

NaShonda has taught in North Carolina schools for 20 years.

Over the years, she's seen fewer teacher assistants, fewer classroom supplies, and she's had trouble making ends meet on a teacher's salary. But when her youngest child said she'd like to become a teacher, NaShonda didn't hesitate to encourage her.

We want NaShonda's daughter and thousands like her to follow through and become teachers. Let's show NaShonda and other educators that we value and respect them. Ms. Cooke, please stand so we can recognize your hard work and the amazing service of teachers all across our state.

North Carolina is still ranked 37th in teacher pay nationwide. That's not the respect they deserve. When I send you my budget, we'll put our schools and our teachers first.

Although we disagree on some issues, I believe there is bipartisan agreement that education will succeed with a good teacher in every classroom and a good principal in every school. Our message to educators should be clear: we trust you to educate our children. We're putting our money where our trust is.



And we must encourage more of our very best high schoolers to choose teaching as a career. If they'll teach here for at least four years, North Carolina will pay for their college. Teaching Fellows scholarships are a great deal for our state, and they lift the level of respect for the profession. Let's expand the Teaching Fellows program.

Let's give kids a better start by investing more in early childhood education. We've worked together to expand Pre-K to thousands more students, but we shouldn't stop until every child has it.

And let's give our students safe, healthy places to learn.

Right now, 4 in 10 public schools in our state are at least 50 years old. That means they're still using the schools you and I went to. That's great for nostalgia, but not so good for students in classrooms with unreliable heat, leaking roofs or crumbling walls.

K through 12 schools need at least 8 billion dollars in new construction and renovations. There's a smart way to build them that locks in financing against the whims of future legislatures and lets the people decide at the same time.

It gets hammers swinging all across the state, and still leaves money for good teachers and principals. This session, let's have the people vote on a strong school construction bond.

We must be determined to build an economy that works for everyone.

In many ways, our state is the picture of success. Raleigh and Durham are hubs for innovation. The Triad is a growing center for aviation and advanced manufacturing. Charlotte is a global banking capital. Our rural areas offer unique opportunities.



Just last week, Charlotte hosted the NBA All Star Game, showing people from around the world what we already know: North Carolina is America's best place to live and do business—and play basketball.

When I took office, House Bill 2 was hurting North Carolinians and holding our economy back. Two years ago, I stood before you and said we must repeal it. And with bipartisan support, HB2 is gone.

But there is more to do to fight discrimination. We must show the rest of the nation and the world who we really are: a state that values diversity, that is welcoming, and that is open for business. I've signed two executive orders that reaffirm those values by banning workplace discrimination.

Our economy is strongest when every North Carolinian can contribute. As we continue to grow and thrive, we're determined not to leave anyone behind.

In the past two years, we've announced more than 40,000 new jobs and billions of dollars of investment in both urban and rural parts of North Carolina. We've worked together with you legislators to expand our economic development tool kit, which now includes strong incentives.

It's been great to welcome major companies including Honeywell, Advance Auto Parts, Credit Suisse, Egger Wood Products and Triangle Tyre. Our unemployment rate is below the national average and our economy is strong.

But despite this success middle class families are still struggling for better wages. There is an answer for them. Today, there are thousands of jobs available, from advanced manufacturing to construction to technology and health care. Jobs that offer better pay.



Yet employers tell me they struggle to find the skilled workers they need. And many workers tell me they struggle to find better-paying jobs.

We're determined to get them together. That's why we started NC Job Ready, a program that trains workers in the skills employers need.

We're already seeing success. Our Finish Line Grants help community college students living on the economic edge. The grants help people stay in school when they face unexpected costs like car repairs, medical emergencies and childcare.

Take Tukeda Douglas, a community college student and a mother of three. I first met Tukeda during a visit to Alamance Community College last month. She wanted a better career, so she enrolled to become a dental assistant.

But balancing the additional cost of childcare was too much, so Tukeda nearly dropped out. A Finish Line grant helped her stay in school and she expects to graduate this summer.

Tukeda is determined not to let anything discourage her, and she's here with us tonight. Let's give her a round of applause for working hard to make a better life for herself and her family.

Just last week, leaders from all over North Carolina, including this legislature, endorsed the goal for 2 million more North Carolinians to have a post-secondary degree or credential by the year 2030.

But people need education in order for us to get there. People in North Carolina now have 41 billion dollars in student debt and many middle-class families often can't afford the education they need.



Last year, I pushed for an effort to provide tuition-free community college for high-demand jobs. This can help us meet our goal. Other states are already doing this, so let's get it done.

Our economy also depends on infrastructure. When I came into office, the Highway Trust Fund wasn't being used efficiently. You in this chamber challenged our Department of Transportation to build roads and bridges faster. We delivered on that challenge, and then we worked together to pass Build NC. This helps keep our state connected and our economy moving.

Connecting our entire state is especially critical for our rural communities. We have the second-largest rural population of any state in the country.

Growing up in Nash County, I spent my summers in the tobacco field, my Friday nights on the football field, and my Sunday mornings in Sunday school and church. My parents and my rural North Carolina community taught me the value of hard work. They taught me the value of a dollar and they taught me the importance of faith, family and community.

For people like Lorenda and Harrell Overman, rural North Carolina will always be home. To them, tending crops and livestock on their farm is more than an occupation—it's a deeply rewarding way of life.

But right now, many rural business owners and farmers are struggling. Lack of broadband access, trade tariffs and natural disasters have hit them hard. Last year, the Overmans saw their soybean crop wiped out by Hurricane Florence, threatening their ability to keep their 18 full-time employees. Thanks to the bipartisan hurricane relief bill we passed, the Overmans and many other farmers like them are getting help.



The Overmans are determined to make their business thrive and pass it on to their kids—the next generation of farmers. Lorenda and Harrell, please stand so we can let you and other farmers across our state know we’re with you.

We all know about rural challenges. So that’s why last year, I launched Hometown Strong. It’s already making a difference, strengthening relationships between state government and over a dozen rural counties.

For instance, some small communities didn’t know how to get funds to fix up struggling downtowns. Hometown Strong is helping connect them with the right resources to get started.

There’s also a monster of an issue facing rural communities: Internet access. Too many North Carolinians lack Internet connection they need to apply for jobs, do homework or run a small business. Among households without broadband, about 95 percent are in rural areas--a digital divide with very real consequences.

This legislative session we can make a real dent in this problem. I’m asking you to join me in an expansive effort to complete rural broadband projects. We can leverage public/private partnerships to bridge the digital divide and connect all parts of our state to opportunity.

Finally, we must be determined to help the people of our state become healthier.

We’ve made important strides. We’ve protected our clean air and water by punishing polluters and stopping emerging contaminants from being discharged into the Cape Fear River.



Every North Carolina family deserves to know their drinking water is safe. In October, our administration got people near coal ash ponds off bottled water, and they now have permanent, safe water. Our Department of Environmental Quality will continue to push for safe storage of coal ash across the state.

We also must protect the health of our coastal communities from the threats of offshore drilling. The federal government must hear us loud and clear: Not off our coast.

And we know too many North Carolinians don't have health insurance. Tonight, I want to talk about a bipartisan way we can get 500 thousand working North Carolinians some help.

There are neighbors in your hometowns who are working two jobs that don't provide any health insurance. Doctors and nurses across our state see it every day. Are we willing to help them? It's time.

Police chiefs and sheriffs say they're overwhelmed by the wreckage of opioid overdose and people who need treatment—not jails. Are we willing to help them? It's time.

Business owners say they're tired of paying higher premiums to cover the cost of treating the uninsured in emergency rooms. Are we willing to help them? It's time.

Rural hospitals are bordering on bankruptcy and even closing because many of their patients don't have health insurance. Are we willing to help them? It's time.

Our communities could use an extra 30 to 40 thousand more good-paying jobs. Are we willing to help them? It's time.

Many North Carolinians are tired of their tax dollars going to Washington to cover people in other states, but not our state. Are



we willing to help them? It's time.

There's someone in our audience who's willing to help them. Dr. Gregory Adams, a pediatrician who practices in Watauga County, sees the problem of lack of health insurance in his own community. He worries many people won't get treated for their chronic conditions unless we do something about it. He says it makes no sense to say no to something our federal tax dollars already pay for in other states.

Dr. Adams believes that as soon as possible, we should expand Medicaid. Let's follow the doctor's orders.

Dr. Adams is determined to keep people healthy. Dr. Adams, please stand so we can acknowledge you and all the doctors, nurses and hospitals that want to do this.

Guys, we can do this. I know some of you have concerns. Let's listen to each other and get this done the North Carolina way.

When I became your governor, I envisioned a North Carolina where people are healthier, better educated, with more money in their pockets, and where people have the opportunity to live lives of purpose and abundance.

I envisioned a North Carolina where every child in every school would get an excellent education that allowed them to pursue their purpose.

I envisioned a North Carolina where every family could live fulfilling lives without the cost of health care stealing their dreams.

I envisioned a North Carolina where every worker had a big enough paycheck to provide for themselves and their families.



Those of you sitting in this House chamber tonight know that what we've outlined is easier said than done. But it's time to start doing.

The people of North Carolina are determined for us to work together. They have spoken.

They want a more balanced approach to government. They want us to invest in our public schools. They want the education and training they need to get a good-paying job. They want safe drinking water. They want their neighbors to have access to health care. They simply want the opportunity to make the most of their lives. They want us to do our jobs.

It's our job to build a better North Carolina that makes that possible, whether a person lives in Cherokee or Chocowinity.

I love this state. I believe you do, too. Every one of you. I believe we have broad agreement on what we want for our state. We sometimes differ on how to achieve it. But let's debate in good faith, not with political stunts. In the open, not behind closed doors. With respect for those who disagree, not disdain. We need to seek common ground and build solutions upon it.

Just like the people I've met along the way, I'm determined. I'm determined to make our state better. I believe you are, too. Starting tonight, let's figure out how best to serve those who sent us here. There's nothing a determined North Carolina can't do.

God bless you, our country, and the great state of North Carolina.