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Donald Trump packs a policy punch for New Jersey

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Rolling back Medicaid expansion would cause about 528,000 adult New Jerseyans to lose their health coverage and shortchange New Jersey about \$3 billion a year in federal funds, a study says



(Photo: AFP/Getty Images)

President Donald J. Trump's inaugural address was much like his scorched-earth campaign — a harsh critique of the nation's past and present, a big league stick in the eye to the Washington establishment, a dark and ominous screed against globalism. For New Jerseyans and much of the nation — on either side of the Trump divide — it also likely marks the quiet before the storm. On a swath of policy fronts Trump pledges to change course, sharply and to the right. Beyond the weekend's celebrations and protests, the enduring question is how.

Garden State business leaders heralded his pledges to jettison government red tape and regulations, while worrying of trade wars. Among their questions: What will Trump's so-called "America first" policies mean to the state's important import-export sector, jobs tied to selling abroad, consumer prices and cross-border relationships?

Different questions greet the new president's catch-all promise to end "this American carnage" — a gloomy cornucopia Trump described as rampant crime and gangs, poverty and drugs, and an "education system flush with cash" that still leaves our "young and beautiful students deprived of all knowledge."

Specific policy prescriptions for the likes of Camden and Asbury Park, or Colts Neck for that matter? Trump hasn't said, but clues arrived just ahead of the inaugural: The Hill reported that Trump and GOP Congressional leaders were preparing deep budget cuts. He has already called for more charter schools.

Teasing out meaning

Trump used his speech to double-down on pledges to dismantle the Environmental Protection Agency "in almost every form," shred the Affordable Care Act and "bring back our borders," which during the campaign meant stepping up deportations of undocumented immigrants and building a wall along the southern border.

But details? Not just yet. For now, the lack of specifics — across the policy spectrum — has some teasing out meaning for New Jersey in the smallest utterances by Trump.

"We will build new roads and highways and bridges and airports and tunnels and railways all across our wonderful nation," Trump told the world Friday. He has promised to spend \$1 trillion on infrastructure projects over 10 years.

To John Boyd, a Princeton-based site selection expert for manufacturing companies, the tunnel reference was enough to sound like a favorable assessment of an important New Jersey-New York project, the \$24 billion Gateway Program, which would build a new Hudson River rail tunnel and renovate the existing system.

"Just for him to specifically say the word 'tunnels,' I think there was something to read into that," Boyd said. "The tunnel would be an obvious benefit to the region, and I think that there are additional headwinds from Trump taking office that will be favorable to New Jersey's business development community."

Former President Barack Obama pledged that the federal government would pick up half of the Gateway Program's cost. Congressional Republicans long opposed such big public works spending requests by Obama. Officials in the two states have been trying to gauge Trump's interest.

“Projects that move the most people, like the Gateway tunnel in this region are the kinds of projects that deserve federal support,” said Janna Chernetz, a senior New Jersey policy analyst with the Tri-State Transportation Campaign. “If Trump is serious about fulfilling his promises to improve the country’s economy and infrastructure, Gateway must be a key focus.”

Post-speech tweets

Trump in his opening speech didn’t say anything about his proposal to redo the nation’s health insurance system, which, if implemented, would affect New Jersey “far more than most states,” said Gordon MacInnes, head of New Jersey Policy Perspective, a left-leaning think tank.

A few hours after the inaugural parade, however, Trump signed an executive order directing agencies to ease the regulatory burdens associated with Obamacare until Congress repeals and replaces the health care system.

An analysis by MacInnes’ group says rolling back Medicaid expansion would cause about 528,000 adult New Jerseyans to lose their health coverage and shortchange New Jersey about \$3 billion a year in federal funds.

Trump hasn’t given much detail on what he’d like to see in a new health insurance law, though in recent weeks he has said the new law should not lag behind the old, and asserted that everyone should get coverage. Funding it? No clue just yet.

“I’m seeing comments from Republican governors and Republican members of Congress that we may need to revise the Affordable Care Act, not demolish it, so that’s a good sign,” MacInnes said.

Nor has Trump given specifics about what he’ll do with a program for undocumented immigrant youth that allows them to legally work and avoid deportation — an Obama executive order formally known as Deferred Action for Childhood Arrivals (DACA).

Trump during the campaign said he’d end the exceptions. But adviser and former House Speaker Newt Gingrich in an interview with the Washington Post predicted the enrollees “are not going to be deported; they’ll never be deported.”

Gingrich said Trump would likely refuse to accept any new people under the program.

Still, Trump’s promises to tighten immigration policy were important to voters like Long Branch resident David Cohen.

“He has to control the illegal aliens because they are the ones who are putting Americans out of work. That’s what we voted on and he’ll do it,” Cohen said. “It’s not going to be a revolving door anymore.”

New Jersey has a half-million undocumented immigrants, with 23,000 thousand DACA applicants, a study by the Migration Policy Institute found.

“Taking DACA away not only hurts young people but hurts their families, and over time it will hurt New Jersey’s economy,” said Chia-Chia Wang, organizing and advocacy director for the Immigrant Rights Program at the Newark-based American Friends Service Committee.

“There’s been confusion in the communities about what the new president is going to announce about the program, and when. We’re hoping for the best.”

A new course

Trump through his cabinet picks and other appointments has signaled that he will veer sharply from Obama’s policies and govern from the right. Top jobs have gone to those hailing from Wall Street, the military or immense wealth.

Billionaire Republican donor Betsy DeVos, for one, is a wild card for New Jersey if she’s confirmed as the next education secretary. New Jersey’s school spending on average is close to \$20,000 per pupil. Gov. Chris Christie is pushing to change the formula for funding the state’s schools, including increasing reliance on less costly charter schools.

DeVos is an outspoken proponent of charter and private schools – she supported a school-voucher referendum in her home state of Michigan that would have enabled parents to use public money for tuition at religious schools – and Democrats see her as hostile to traditional public education.

As with most of Trump’s Cabinet picks, DeVos still awaits a confirmation vote.

Tom Bracken, president of the New Jersey Chamber of Commerce, said he heard the Trump speech as a rallying cry to improve the state’s business climate.

“He said government should be supportive and shouldn’t be intervening. That would be a great shift for us in New Jersey. He said, ‘think big, dream bigger.’ What we focus on in New Jersey is correcting our issues, so there’s no big thinking and dreaming going on. We don’t have a plan,” Bracken said.

“Even though we have made some progress in recent years, New Jersey’s economy has continued to under-perform. With the abundance of talent, assets and resources at our disposal, we should consistently outperform other states, not under-perform them.”

Trump’s first moves on the business front got the attention of the environmental community.

The new administration's White House.gov website went up Friday. There were promises to boost the coal industry, make federal lands more welcoming to oil and gas drilling, and scrub the Obama administration's "harmful and unnecessary" climate action and water-pollution rules.

Environmentalists worry such policy changes contribute to climate change, rising sea levels, and make for more frequent and violent storms — think superstorm Sandy.

"Trump says he is here to transfer power to the people, but if you really look close he is transferring power from the people to Big Oil, Big Gas, and the billionaires," said Jeff Tittel, New Jersey director for the Sierra Club. "Even though 2016 has been the hottest year on record, Trump is going against climate scientists to eliminate consideration of climate impacts and public scrutiny so he can initiate a war on the environment."

His critique: "Instead of draining the swamp, Trump is going to fill it with pipeline and oil rigs."

Another case where the details are to come.