

# Alaska Gov. Bill Walker delivers first State of State speech

By Matt Buxton mbuxton@newsminer.com | Posted: Wednesday, January 21, 2015 11:45 pm

JUNEAU, Alaska — Gov. Bill Walker will take a hard line on investigating the Alaska National Guard and pledged to sign a child sex abuse prevention bill as soon as lawmakers get it to his desk, but just what else the independent governor has in store for the 29th Alaska Legislature is unclear.

Walker rallied lawmakers with his campaign pledge of unity and bipartisanship during his first State of the State address on Wednesday night, but left many looking for more on just how he plans to guide Alaska through the next four years.

“Alaskans, yes, there are challenges ahead. But so many of our most significant accomplishments have come in the face of adversity and in times when we have worked together — with no agenda but to strengthen and prosper our state,” the governor told a joint session of the House and Senate.

Walker laid out, in largely general terms, his plans to weather the fiscal crisis, reduce the cost of energy throughout Alaska, to begin construction on a natural gas pipeline, to expand Alaska’s economy, to expand health-care access to Alaskans, to continue the fight against rape and sexual violence, to clean up the Alaska National Guard, to improve education and to be a leader in arctic policy.

His specifics came on two points: his support for a child sex abuse prevention bill and his plan to ensure the investigation of the Alaska National Guard on allegations of sexual abuse, embezzlement and other misconduct.

Walker said he plans to sign a bill known as Erin’s Law. The bill requires schools to create age-appropriate programs to educate students about sexual abuse and warning signs. The bill is named after child sexual abuse survivor Erin Merryn and has been passed in many other states.

The bill was introduced last year and nearly made it into law before stumbling in the legislative



## State of the State

Gov. Bill Walker delivers the first State of the State address of his administration on the second night of the 29th Alaska Legislature. He will deliver the State of the Budget on Thursday night. Matt Buxton/News-Miner

traffic jam of the end of session.

“I ask that this legislature make Alaska the next state to pass Erin’s Law,” he said, to applause from lawmakers.

It was the only direct mention of legislation by the governor.

Walker also said he plans to have Attorney General Craig Richards name an independent special investigator for the National Guard “to get to the bottom of the allegations of sexual assault, misconduct and cover up.”

“As the commander in chief of the Alaska National Guard, let me assure you that the perpetrators will be brought to justice, face expulsion, incarceration or both,” he said.

Those two specifics were positively received in the responses issued by the legislative majority and minority caucuses in both chambers.

“I really appreciated that he is embracing Erin’s law,” said Majority Whip Rep. Bob Herron, D-Bethel.

The rest of the State of the State address received more of a lukewarm response from the Majority, who said they appreciated the tone but wanted more specifics.

“It was a good speech on ‘let’s work together,’ but it was not any different than the campaign rhetoric,” said Senate Majority Leader Sen. John Coghill, R-North Pole. “It was short on nuts and bolts.”

Lawmakers specifically said they wanted to hear more on Walker’s plans to continue work on a natural gas pipeline, stating that Alaska is already well beyond his pledge to build a pipeline to tidewater.

Minority Democrats were largely positive about Walker’s speech, with Anchorage Democratic Sen. Berta Gardner saying she was “gushing” over Walker’s speech during a news conference.

For those left wanting more, particularly when it comes to the budget and Walker’s plans to tackle the projected \$3.5 billion budget shortfall, they’ll have an opportunity tonight. Walker will return to the joint session to deliver the resurrected State of the Budget address at 7 p.m. tonight.

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