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Gov. Andrew M. Cuomo delivers his annual State of the State address Wednesday at the Empire State Plaza Convention Center in Albany. Associated Press

Cuomo envisions \$100 million genome research facility

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ALBANY – Gov. Andrew M. Cuomo unveiled an election-year grab bag of policy proposals Wednesday in his fourth State of the State, including funding for a genome research consortium between Buffalo and Manhattan, bonuses for top-performing public school teachers, modest tax breaks for property owners and tougher penalties for repeat drunk drivers and teens who text and drive.

Cuomo said he will dip again into his pledge made several years ago to spend \$1 billion on Buffalo job creation efforts by authorizing a \$100 million genome research program – with \$50 million going to the University at Buffalo and potentially other groups in the Buffalo area – to connect scientists in Western New York with genome researchers at a new center in Manhattan.

Cuomo and researchers involved in the project said jobs and scientific breakthroughs to treat cancer and other diseases will result from the state investment. He said five companies already have committed to locate or expand on the Buffalo Niagara Medical Campus to be a part of a consortium with a not-for-profit genome center in Manhattan that opened last fall. Cuomo said the research work “will create an entirely new industry for Western New York.”

The 69-minute address also included a call for a major, \$2 billion borrowing to fund new technological expansions and space for prekindergarten classrooms – a bond program political analysts say is likely to bolster turnout in key geographic areas for an initiative that will appear on the same ballot as Cuomo in his first re-election bid this November.

A number of ideas, including expansion of abortion rights and taxpayer-financed campaigns, were rejected less than a year ago by Republicans who control the State Senate, and Cuomo made no mention, despite claims last fall to The Buffalo News that he would, about penalties or “dramatic action” for failing public schools.

Cuomo spent a third of his speech talking about what he called his accomplishments in his first three

"In three years, my friends, you have reversed decades of decline," Cuomo told lawmakers in a state convention center near the Capitol.

Republican and Conservative Party leaders dismissed the Cuomo speech as election-year rhetoric with major new spending plans from a governor who should have embraced deeper tax cuts when he first took office.

In a hall with teeth-chattering temperatures, a favorite thermostat setting by this governor for his major, longer speeches, Cuomo offered the political spectrum of ideas in his address. For liberals, he said he will issue regulations to permit people with certain medical conditions to obtain marijuana to treat pain and other ailments at 20 hospitals around the state, seek to expand abortion rights, and raise the automatic, mandatory age from 16 to 18 at which teens arrested for crimes can be tried as an adult.

For right-of-center New Yorkers, he offered up a tax cut package for upstate manufacturers and beleaguered property taxpayers, a new state college focusing on counter-terrorism and homeland security and several criminal-justice measures, including crackdowns on repeat drunk drivers who he said should permanently lose their license if convicted of three DWI offenses.

The governor was silent or vague on some issues, such as how he would pay for a program to offer pre-kindergarten at 700 school districts across the state or on the controversial issue of the new Common Core education testing program that many lawmakers say they will push to put on hold. He also did not mention the word "fracking," a natural gas extraction process that critics and supporters have been waiting word on for six years.

"That says New York is closed for business," said Ed Cox, the state GOP chairman about fracking, an issue that brought out demonstrators from as far away as Buffalo to protest outside Cuomo's speech.

The speech, subdued compared with some of Cuomo's previous addresses, included some shout-outs to hunters, a group he alienated last year with new gun and ammunition restrictions; Wednesday, he said he wanted to open up more areas of the state to hunting by installing new hunting blinds and trails.

Details of his broad visions will come when he presents his 2014 budget later this month, including his plan to have the state take over the operations of Kennedy and LaGuardia airports in New York City, facilities now run by a joint New York-New Jersey authority. He said he also wants to quicken the process to upgrade New York's aging electricity transmission lines to help move more power from upstate facilities to power-hungry downstate.

The governor also proposed giving teachers who are rated at the top of the state's evaluation scale annual bonuses up to \$20,000. "You want teachers who perform? ... Pay them like the professionals they are," he told lawmakers.

Cuomo also wants to mandate that schools notify the state Education Department and the State Police if there are patterns of discrimination or harassment, "including bullying, taunting or intimidation," on their school grounds. And, he wants to offer full scholarships to state university colleges to the top 10 percent of high school graduates if they agree to pursue college degrees in science, technology, engineering or math.

Cuomo, who has at least \$30 million in his campaign account, again asked lawmakers to approve a taxpayer-funded campaign finance system.

In another if-at-first-you-don't-succeed gambit, Cuomo called for a number of ethics-related changes, such as shining more light on the outside incomes of legislators to improve Albany's reputation. He did so before a group of lawmakers, many of whom were sent subpoenas last year by a Cuomo special investigatory panel about their finances.

"I do believe in government ... and I don't want to see it limited, and government is limited by the lack of trust," he said of taxpayers' attitudes about Albany's many corruption and sexual controversies in recent years.

Intraparty battle lines became more publicly evident as Bill de Blasio, the new mayor of New York City, made the rounds to push his plan, so far opposed by Cuomo, to offer prekindergarten classes in all New York City schools by raising \$500 million a year through a tax hike on residents there making more than

\$500,000 a year. Cuomo embraced the prekindergarten plan, but did so on a statewide basis and without divulging how he would pay for such an expensive program on a recurring basis.

Critics questioned Cuomo's soaring rhetoric and his claimed accomplishments.

"It's too little too late," said Cox. "It's election year, and we need the bold tax cuts that should have been done seven years ago," he added of Democratic Party control of the governor's office.

"It sure seems like he's spending a lot of money here today," added Mike Long, the Conservative Party chairman.

Audience members included Buffalo Mayor Byron W. Brown, who has been mentioned prominently as a potential Cuomo running mate if Cuomo jettisons Lt. Gov. Robert Duffy for the November elections.

Brown praised the genome research project. "It's another huge investment in our community," he said.

Republican State Sen. Patrick Gullivan, of Elma, praised Cuomo's focus on economic development and cutting taxes. But he wondered about the effect of engaging in a massive, \$2 billion bonding program for schools. "I don't know if asking the taxpayers to do more is right. Can't we take it from other places?" Gullivan said.

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