

Kasich urges GOP to expand Medicaid



John Kasich's speech to the Lucas County GOP's Lincoln Day Dinner is his first of six to county Republican groups through spring. Dave Zapotosky | The Blade

By Joe Hallett

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TOLEDO — It was a political event, but Gov. John Kasich was of no mind to talk politics.

Instead, he focused on policy last night in a 34-minute speech to about 500 people at the Lucas County Republican Party's Lincoln Day Dinner, the first of six such county GOP dinners on his schedule through spring.

The governor offered a shortened redux of the State of the State speech he delivered in Lima on Tuesday night, urging the Toledo faithful to get behind his proposed \$63.3 billion two-year budget, while unabashedly touting his administration's achievements.

Kasich's litany of successes included 122,000 jobs created and an \$8 billion deficit turned into a \$1 billion surplus without raising taxes.

"We now in Ohio have momentum," said Kasich, who said his budget was crafted out of a "moral obligation" to create jobs.

The blueprint, however, has received a lukewarm reception from the legislature's Republican majorities; members question his call to expand Medicaid to 275,000 more low-income Ohioans.

As he did in Lima, Kasich passionately appealed for support of the Medicaid expansion, saying that “the Good Book says you don’t ignore the least among you.”

Noting that the expansion would save Ohioans \$400 million over two years and bring in billions in federal money to insure the working poor, Kasich said: “Abraham Lincoln did what’s right to lift human beings, and our conservative Republican Party must do the same.”

Toledo Mayor Michael Bell, a Democrat-turned-independent who attended the dinner, called the Medicaid expansion “extremely important ... because most of those people who do not have any type of insurance end up in emergency rooms, and that type of treatment is much more expensive.”

Republican legislators also appear wary of Kasich’s plan to extend the state’s sales tax to dozens of services, even though he also would cut it by a half percentage point, to 5 percent. The GOP ranks also have shown some hostility to Kasich’s call for a modest tax on shale drillers.

But in an interview before his speech, Kasich said he is optimistic that his budget will be approved mostly intact, and will even draw some Democratic support. “There will be changes to the tax part, for sure, and there will be changes to the Medicaid thing, (but) just so the goal doesn’t go away,” the governor said. “I think, so far, the legislative leaders have been pretty positive about this thing ... I think there’s reason to think some of the Democrats will vote with us.”

Cuyahoga County Executive Ed FitzGerald said this week he is leaning toward seeking the Democratic nomination to challenge Kasich in 2014, and he criticized Kasich’s tax proposals as favoring the wealthy.

“I have concerns about whether or not the tax system we end up with is going to be regressive and is going to affect middle-class and working people more than the system does now,” FitzGerald said.

“There are some consequences for businesses I’ve heard from who think that the broadening of the sales tax is going to make them less competitive.”

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