

Mr. President, Mr. Majority Leader, Mr. President Pro Tem, Mr. Assistant Minority Leader, colleagues, friends, and family.

It is my honor to welcome you all to this chamber, this morning, as we open the 71st General Assembly.

Most of us electeds have had several years of experience serving in the Senate, but we are fortunate to welcome eleven newly sworn in members:

- Senator Don Coram
- Senator [Lois Court](#)
- Senator [Stephen Fenberg](#)
- Senator [Rhonda Fields](#)
- Senator [Bob Gardner](#)
- Senator [Daniel Kagan](#)
- Senator [Dominick Moreno](#)
- Senator [Kevin Priola](#)
- Senator [Jim Smallwood](#)
- Senator Angela Williams
- and Senator Rachel Zenzinger

Please join me in welcoming them to the State Senate.

When I began my work in the Senate, I entered in May 2010, in the last few months of the 67th General Assembly. That following January in 2011, I entered the 68th General Assembly, followed by the 69th, the 70th, and now the 71st General Assembly.

As I begin the last years of my Senate career, I cannot help but take a look back at how much our state has changed in six years. Colorado's population was estimated to be 5,029,324 then, and currently stands at 5,540,545, and growing each month. That's a 10 percent increase in six years.

Six years ago, our unemployment rate was 8.9%, according to the Bureau of Labor Statistics. As of November 2016, it had fallen to 3.2% -- among the lowest we have seen in years.

However, let us not forget that as we've seen unemployment drop in these six years, we have seen sharp increases in homelessness among our students, particularly in the Denver, Pueblo, and Mesa County areas.

Six years ago, there was no Colorado Water Plan. It was in 2013 that the Governor issued his Executive Order calling for the Water Conservation Board to create the state's first ever water plan. Coloradans from the north, to the south, to the east, to the west depend on this precious resource for everything from their farms to their cities. This living document will guide Colorado in protecting and preserving its water for years to come.

Six years ago, our state budget was \$18.2 billion. Last year's budget was \$27 billion.

A civil union was not part of the law six years ago. The legalization of retail marijuana had yet to be approved through Amendment 64. The only beer sold in grocery stores was the 3.2% kind.

In these six years, technology has quickly nudged us forward. Entrepreneurs are inspiring and creating new tools that are quickly changing our world. Six years ago, you could never have imagined ordering a car with just a touch on a screen. Who would have thought even six years ago, the 71st General Assembly would be discussing bills relating to the operation of self-driving vehicles.

In these six years, Colorado's blue collar jobs workforce has gotten older. With that comes the need for young people to be trained and step into to fill these jobs. While visiting Pueblo Community College's welding program, I got to see how the school is showing Colorado's young people that you don't have to attend a four-year college and go into debt to get a good paying job. One welding student I met, 18-year-old Brett Salazar, will graduate in two years with the skills he needs to succeed, and thanks to the program, will enter into a good-paying job at Vestas in Pueblo. Brett's success shows how important trade schools and community colleges are to training young people to replenish our retiring workforce.

We must also be mindful about how advancements in technology like automation are rapidly changing what jobs need to be filled. Trade schools and community colleges will be important to bridging the gap with the manufacturing world to ensure the "new collar" jobs of tomorrow can be filled with skilled workers.

Agriculture has changed as well. Thanks to Amendment 64's passage in 2012, farmers in Colorado now grow hemp as a cash crop, with demand growing for its use in making things like paper and clothes. And I know many of you in this chamber have sampled some of Colorado's renowned craft beers. Not only are we ranked third nationwide in craft beer production, but thanks to Colorado farmers, our country is now the world's leading producer of hops, surpassing Germany! One thing that has not changed in farming is the dependence upon the weather.

Today, six years later, I am honored to have been chosen by my colleagues to lead the Senate Democratic Caucus, and honored to work with President Grantham and the Senate Republicans to address the many needs and challenges facing our state.

And those challenges are many.

We have been elected to respond to these challenges, and Coloradans expect nothing less from us. We can no longer neglect the need to fund our crumbling infrastructure, nor fail to address the funding needed to repair and build roads and bridges. The American Road and Transportation Builders Association found 521 of Colorado's bridges to be structurally deficient -- meaning key elements of the structure are considered to be in poor or worse condition! That's over 500 bridges Colorado families drive on that are falling apart. As our population has grown over these past years, we have seen traffic congestion get worse, and our roads fall into further disrepair with more potholes. The people of Colorado should be able to drive their kids to school and drive to work on safe and reliable roads and bridges. Dollars for transportation means putting people back to work in good paying jobs, and making travel safer.

But we cannot accomplish these feats through proposals that would cut deeply into our already underfunded classrooms, and vital services Coloradans depend upon.

Therefore, I urge us to also consider the option of moving the Hospital Provider Fee into an enterprise fund. As you all know, last year every major newspaper editorial board, business chambers of commerce, and rural groups in Colorado came out publicly in support of moving the Hospital Provider Fee into an enterprise fund. This solution was at our fingertips last year, but partisan lines kept us from getting it done.

Moving the Hospital Provider Fee into an enterprise, in fact, honors the voters' intent on TABOR, and would not alter the TABOR cap or raise taxes. It would simply isolate the fee, and remove it from the general fund where it was improperly co-mingled in the first place.

As you know, in the Governor's current proposed budget, we see a \$195 million reduction in hospital provider fee collections. That's \$195 million lost in matching federal dollars to hospitals.

Hospitals in rural parts of our state hugely benefit from the federal supplemental money from the hospital provider fee. Last year, rural hospitals paid \$45,096,427 in Hospital Provider Fee funds, and actually received \$147,542,829 in supplemental federal dollars. These hospitals not only care for so many hardworking families and

their children, but they create jobs across the state, allowing hardworking families to stay in the communities they love and call home.

Members: We are not in a position to pick winners and losers by trading the health of our working families for the health of our roads. We can, and should prioritize both, and we have a solution to do that. But we had that solution last year, too. If not this solution, then what? Senate Democrats are willing to listen, but we need to get something done.

Let me remind you, every year, we hear that our legislative session accomplished little. The University of Denver put out a special report on the role and scope and expectations of the state legislature, which implies that there is a belief lawmakers don't know or understand how to work in a bipartisan way to get things done for the people of Colorado. This year, let's work out solutions so we don't have to choose between the health of our working families and the health of our roads.

For our side of the aisle, a major priority will be protecting the progress Colorado has made in being at the forefront of the new energy economy. We have been extremely fortunate to be a nationwide leader on energy issues. This is in part due to the leadership and vision of our state and nationally elected officials, including U.S. Senators Michael Bennet and Cory Gardner, who supported the federal tax credit for wind and solar, making them a viable option in a competitive market. Our utility companies are taking advantage of these opportunities, and I want to give a shout out to some of these companies, including Tri-State and Xcel Energy, who have invested in renewable energy in ways that benefits our environment, communities, and Colorado's economy. Not only are renewables like wind and solar cleaner, but they are cheaper to produce and more efficient.

Companies like Xcel and Tri-State have shown that being profitable companies and being good stewards of the environment absolutely go hand in hand. Let me give you another example.

It would take looking back further than just 6 years to understand and appreciate Colorado's mining history. While there are challenges facing mining industries, Colorado's economy continues to be enhanced by some important mining operations today. I was fortunate and delighted to visit the Climax mine in Leadville recently. The mine began its operations in 1918. Its molybdenum is used mainly in steel alloys, and early operations produced the metal for armored battle vehicles in both World Wars.

Climax is an economic giant in the High Country. Summit and Lake Counties have received millions of dollars in tax revenue from Climax since 2012.

The continuing legacy of excellence in environmental stewardship by Climax was celebrated in August, 2014 with the unveiling of their \$200 million dollar water treatment plant. The treated water is discharged into Ten Mile Creek, which flows into local fisheries and recreation areas. They are at the forefront of water treatment in the national and international mining industry -- proving that mining and care of the environment can stand together.

The Climax mine has completed several multi-million dollar environmental restoration projects where land that was previously affected by mining and mineral processing operations have been restored to a condition that mimics the pre-operations habitat, vegetation, and wildlife ecology.

I have invited Dr. Gail Mizner, and her husband, the President of Climax Mine, Michael Kendrick, to be with us today to accept our appreciation. Michael Kendrick is a graduate of the Colorado School of Mines and Denver University, and has shown through the work Climax mine has done, and continues to do, shows that industry and the environment can work closely together.

Please join me in thanking him for his service to the management of the mine, and for being one of Colorado's finest employers. Michael, please stand.

One of our most important goals is keeping Colorado at the forefront of the new energy economy, as it has been for well over a decade since the passage of Colorado's very own renewable energy standard in 2004. We will support efforts at the state and local levels to conserve our natural environment, and address the economic benefits of wind, solar, and energy efficiency. I would add that there are now more than 62,000 clean energy jobs in Colorado. With the establishment of our Deputy Minority Leader for Conservation, Clean Energy, and Climate Change, we aim to work closely with representatives of all energy industries so we can find bipartisan solutions to the challenges facing Colorado's energy future. We want to be clear: our intention is not to demote oil and gas, but to promote a formidable renewable energy portfolio, and a sustainable, clean natural environment.

That's why we, like the vast majority of Coloradans, will continue to hold strong in defending our public lands and ensuring they stay public. Coloradans value these lands as they are part of our heritage and the very soul of our state, and we will not step away from embracing this value.

Our lands are not for sale to the highest bidder.

Now, I would like to point to another priority Senate Democrats are taking the lead on, and that is addressing the heroin and opioid epidemic, which is not only affecting

our present, but our future as well. In this chamber, there's a good chance the vast majority of you know someone close to you, or in your community, who is battling addiction. In our state, as well as in our entire country, opioid abuse is a serious problem.

The abuse of opioids like heroin, morphine, and prescription pain relieving drugs has been singled out by the Center for Disease Control as one of the top epidemics facing our country. Our state's health department found that overdose deaths from just one kind of opioid painkiller outnumbered all homicides in Colorado in 2015. 259 people died from overdoses of what health officials call "natural" prescription opioids — drugs like hydrocodone and oxycodone. That compares with 205 people who died from homicide.

We are particularly seeing this problem in Southern Colorado. Southern Colorado is home to only 6% of the state's population. Meanwhile however, the region represented 18.1% of heroin treatment admissions in 2014. This is a problem that hurts young people, and tears apart communities. That's why, under the lead of the Assistant Minority Leader, Senate Democrats will be introducing a bill to create a pilot program for Routt and Pueblo counties, two areas experiencing particularly high opioid addiction, to make access to life-saving treatment and care more accessible to those struggling with addiction.

All across this great state of Colorado, there are many challenges. We hear about them, we read about them, and sometimes we experience them firsthand.

Towns losing jobs and people because a mine shuts down or closes.

A farmer's crop is lost because a flooding creek erodes the land, and takes away the floodgate.

A rural school lacks science and math teachers.

A family grieves the early death of a child killed by a drunk driver.

Families lack healthcare, and are not able to afford the costs of keeping their families on quality health insurance.

But in Colorado, there are many resources to fight the challenges. 35 of them are sitting in this chamber. Some of a community's greatest assets are its leaders. Leader who listen, who hear the cries of their people or their land. You all are those resources, and I am proud to serve with you.

I started this speech by looking back, and I want to end it by looking back a little further than six years ago.

The class of 1964. That's my graduating high school class. 43 of us spent 12 years together. Some are gone now. Royce was the first to leave us soon after graduation. He died in the Vietnam War, fighting for his county. Then came Donnie, the second one to leave us. Donnie had polio, and was born with a cleft palate. He was our class clown. He would catch bullfrogs from the creek and hide them in our English teacher's desk. One day, Donnie told his wife, Margaret, another member of our class, that as he looked back on his 24 years, he saw no reason to keep living. He said he had nothing more to give. Then Donnie took his life with Margaret helplessly watching.

A few weeks ago, as we were traveling to Taos for Christmas, I received a message from the daughter of one of my best friends, Mary Ellen. Mary Ellen was at home, moving towards her last hours of life. Her daughter said "She wants to hear your voice." I called Mary Ellen, and I talked about the stuff we did 52 years ago. Looking back to those times, her daughter said, made Mary Ellen smile, though she could no longer speak.

I wondered later, as I walked through the snow, why am I still here? Then it came to me. The Class of '64 gave the world farmers, ranchers, bankers, teachers, preachers, butchers, welders, football coaches, nurses, morticians, town pharmacists, and one State Senator.

I really don't know why I am still here, but I do know this: Royce, Donnie, and Mary Ellen. I live on and work on for them, and their children, and their children's children.

I think that's what each of us is doing here. Working on, going on, for the people of Colorado, and their children, and their children's children.