

**Remarks of Senator Thomas McElveen –
2017 State of the State Democratic Response**

Good evening and Happy New Year to all of my fellow South Carolinians.

Tonight, as we begin a new year and a new session for our state government, we find ourselves in a different posture than after previous State of the State addresses. The unpredictable winds of change that are buffeting our country are also ushering in changes right here in South Carolina.

As we welcome the new legislators who are already working with us now that we have kicked off a new session in the General Assembly, we also anticipate that we will soon have a new administration moving into the Governor's Office.

We South Carolinians thank Governor Haley for her service to our state and extend our best wishes as she awaits confirmation in her new role as the United States Permanent Representative to the United Nations. In these uncertain times and in a world with a great deal of instability, she will assume a critical role in the cabinet of the President-Elect. She will have the prayers of the people of her home state as she undertakes this important job.

As Governor Haley departs and our Governor-in-waiting prepares to take office, tonight we Democrats offer a very simple charge.

We know all too well what needs to be done in South Carolina to ensure future prosperity and competitiveness in a global economy. We know what our responsibilities are to the working men and women of this state, to their families, and to the next generation of South Carolinians. For too long we have failed to summon the will and the courage to work together to turn our challenges into opportunities by fixing what's broken in our state.

The people of our state deserve branches of government that are committed to working together to make every day challenges easier for every day South Carolinians. It's time for all of us to put those folks first - before partisan rhetoric, before partisan politics, before partisan bickering, and before self-preservation. It's time for us to do what's right, and to do it with a sense of urgency that our leaders have failed to execute for well over a decade.

First and foremost, the people of South Carolina demand honesty and integrity from the public officials who have been given the public's trust to solve our biggest challenges and to move this state in the right direction. What they don't deserve is a cloud of corruption charges and far too many instances where public trust has been violated in exchange for personal gain among the people who are

charged with running this state. It's a cloud that we must shake in order to restore the people's trust in our state government.

I'm State Senator Thomas McElveen from Sumter, South Carolina, and I'm a Democrat who's frustrated not only with the way business is being done in Washington, but also in Columbia. I'm a Democrat who believes that trustworthy service and real solutions to our challenges come only when state leaders put partisan labels aside and work together to deliver solid results.

And I'm here to tell you that if we want a strong show of good faith to our fellow South Carolinians in 2017, there is no better option than to immediately work in a bi-partisan manner to solve the biggest, long-term problem that we currently face. Since before I joined the State Senate, it's been the proverbial elephant in the room; it's the issue that everyone is aware of, but also the task that's been long ignored and denied the attention and the effort that it demands.

It's our failing transportation system – our crumbling roads and bridges that worsen with each day of inaction in Columbia. South Carolina spends less per mile on state road maintenance than any other state in the country, and it's become painfully obvious to just about everyone that we are getting exactly what we pay for.

We must solve this problem in a manner that not only restores the highways and roads that lead to our larger cities and urban areas, but in a way that also lends the same support to the rural communities throughout South Carolina – and we need to start right now.

You don't have to be a genius to figure out that the longer a problem goes ignored, the more difficult and expensive it becomes to fix. Think about a leaking roof on your house. That's the best example I can think of to remind my Republican friends that there is nothing conservative about putting off deferred maintenance. Repairing a leaking roof today is a much less expensive fix than the damage to your house which will occur when the problem is put off and the repairs are delayed year after year after year as wood rots and floors, furniture, and everything in between become damaged. The same is true of South Carolina roadways in all parts of our state. That's where we find ourselves today, and the problem will only grow worse until it's adequately addressed.

It's time for our legislators and our soon-to-be new Governor to zero in on a plan that will include a stream of revenue that's exclusively dedicated to restoring, improving, and maintaining our infrastructure so that our roads will be safe, and so that South Carolina will remain a place that's competitive with our neighboring states and a state where people want to do business.

Our reputation as a wonderful place to do business will inevitably rise or fall in proportion to our willingness to take care of our infrastructure. Our reputation as the “Beast of the Southeast” when it comes to economic development will erode right along with our roads if we do not take immediate steps to fix what we all know is a major problem.

We must dedicate revenue to this task in a responsible way, without jeopardizing our commitment to other core obligations, such as the education of our children. It must be a realistic plan that protects these core obligations during the down years or in the event of another recession. We must always invest in ourselves if we expect others to do the same, and it is well-established that infrastructure and education are the “seed corn” of economic development, growth, and prosperity for our citizens. Simply stated, you don’t let your seed corn go bad.

In recent years, we have worked together to create better educational outcomes for South Carolina children. Together, Democrats and Republicans have increased accessibility to four-year-old kindergarten, especially to children whose opportunities have been limited due to limited resources. We know that our investment in 4-K is making a monumental, positive difference. But we have so much more to do. Our State Supreme Court ruled that we must come up with a more equitable manner of supporting public education so that a child living

anywhere in South Carolina doesn't immediately find herself disadvantaged when it comes to access to educational opportunities just because of where she was born and raised.

Much like our transportation system or the roof on your house, the problems we face with our educational system - from primary schools all the way up to our state colleges, universities, and technical schools - will grow worse if we do not provide them the support necessary for excellence.

If we truly want to do right by our constituents, we cannot turn a blind eye to the state of public health here in South Carolina. As we all know, our state has rejected an opportunity to provide access to health care for approximately 300,000 working South Carolinians. Instead, our Governor headed up the charge to send millions of our tax dollars to places like Arkansas, Kentucky, and even New York. In addition to increasing access to quality healthcare, those funds would have created thousands and thousands of jobs right here in South Carolina. Tragically, the refusal of these federal funds, which are actually tax dollars that our citizens sent to Washington, has resulted in rural hospitals and other health care facilities being shuttered across the state.

As we have discovered way too many times over the past few decades, when our state government cuts off the nose to spite the face because of partisanship run

wild, we do so at the expense and peril of hard-working, every day people. And that's morally wrong.

South Carolina Democrats support a health care system that will allow people in every corner of the state not only to have access to treatment and to medical care for themselves and their loved ones, but also access to education on lifestyles conducive to healthier outcomes.

We are also committed to our dedicated state employees, who work hard and in many cases devote their entire careers to serving all of us who call South Carolina home. As lawmakers who are responsible for writing a state budget, we cannot be derelict in our duty to take care of those who make our state function. For too many years, the holes and the cracks in our pension fund have become larger and larger because they have been completely ignored. We must articulate a fair and equitable solution to this pension dilemma, so that the promises that were made to the men and women who work for the State of South Carolina can be kept without adding unfairly to the burden of those who have in many cases gone without the raises and cost of living adjustments that they deserve and need.

We know the challenges we face in South Carolina, and history gives us the reassurance that we can easily overcome them when we work together. In only recent years, we have worked in unison to begin restoring credibility to failing

state agencies such as the Department of Social Services. The work that we're doing there is creating safer situations for countless South Carolina children whose difficult circumstances have left them with no place to turn but the State. Our children are the most precious blessings that we have, and we must protect them. We have worked together to take this responsibility to protect the vulnerable a step further by passing stronger domestic violence laws in this state – laws which send a clear message that violence in the home will never be tolerated, no matter who the offender may be.

Anyone who's familiar with South Carolina is aware of our bounty of precious natural resources and the pristine, beautiful places with which our state has been blessed. By working in a bi-partisan manner to establish and support initiatives such as the State Conservation Bank, we have stood together and shown our commitment to protecting the beaches, mountains, lakes, woodlands, wetlands, rivers, and streams that God has given us for future generations to enjoy.

In what has too often been a vitriolic political climate in our country – and even in our state at times – we have proven that we are capable of setting a different tone in South Carolina, and now we must continue in that same vein. We have achieved our greatest successes when we have worked together, and our greatest successes have come when we've had leadership focused on good results for our state

combined with the will to collaborate. I believe that's what our fellow South Carolinians want, and it's what they deserve from us. The people that I talk to – every day people of different backgrounds and different stations in life – are tired of watching the same old cans being kicked down the road due to partisan bickering and political grandstanding. People become frustrated and lose faith in government when their priorities are ignored by those who control government. We have the ability to alleviate that frustration and to restore that faith if we choose to listen to each other, to respect each other's opinions, and to work together to fashion policies that work for all of our state. Fact is, in the end both parties want many of the exact same things, but just doggedly hang on to their ideas of how to get there. I do not believe that any one person or political party has all of the answers. I believe that somewhere between what Democrats want and what Republicans want, we can find a better way to move forward together, if our goal really is to solve problems and increase opportunity. Sure, we've had our great days in South Carolina, but we have the potential to truly deliver a better day to all South Carolinians.

I am humbled and honored to serve the people of Sumter, Kershaw, Lee, and Richland Counties in the South Carolina Senate. I remain proud to be a member of the South Carolina Senate and its Democratic Caucus. Our party has consistently fought to bring common-sense solutions to problems that affect all South

Carolinians. Day in and day out, the record proves that our members fight for all South Carolinians, and we have delivered. We will continue to work and we will continue to deliver, with the knowledge that we could do so much more if we would all show the same commitment and sense of urgency to tackle South Carolina's greatest challenges together.

While we celebrate our past accomplishments, it's much more important now to focus on what we will do as we move forward. We have to believe that we can have a better day in South Carolina, and that we will. After all, our state motto is *Dum spiro spero*. While I breathe, I hope.

Thank you, and God Bless you all and our Great State of South Carolina.