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SPEECH BY GOVERNOR VIC ATIYEH
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STATE OF THE STATE
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It is with pride and a real sense of nostalgia that I return to Washington County today to deliver my final remarks on the state of our great state.

After all, this is my home. This is where it all started.

More than 28 years ago, the citizens of Washington County took a chance on a politically untested carpet salesman named Vic Atiyeh.

As I look around this room today, I am delighted to see some of the people who helped send me to my first term in the Oregon House.

That was back in 1958.

I never dreamed then that, all these years later, I would still be serving the people of Oregon.

In fact, I remember looking at one of my opponents at the time, Representative Leon Davis, and thinking: "If he gets re-elected, he will have served six years."

That seemed like a very long time.

Now here we are, 28 years later.

It has been said that a politician is someone who rises from obscurity -- to something worse.

But I can tell you that, for Vic Atiyeh, these 28 years have been extremely rewarding ones.

I like to think that I have shared those rewards with the people of the state I love so much.

As I prepare to return to the relative obscurity of private life, I find myself reflecting on the times we have shared.

They have not always been easy times, particularly these past eight years I have spent as your governor.

I have often said, somewhat in jest, that I would liked to have had the term Tom McCall had, or Bob Straub -- or even the term Neal Goldschmidt is about to start.

No other Oregon governor has had to face the economic turmoil that we have faced together these past eight years.

No other generation of Oregonians has been put to so strenuous a test.

No other state in the Union has struggled with exactly the same difficulties that Oregon has finally begun to overcome.

We saw the traditional foundations of our livelihoods -- timber, agriculture, fisheries -- rocked by an economic earthquake.

We saw honest, hard-working people lose their homes, their businesses, their farms to rising taxes, layoffs and interest rates they could no longer pay.

We saw our children standing outside schools whose doors were closed because local voters would not give them the money to stay open.

Through all of this, did Oregonians raise their hands in surrender?

Did we pitifully whine about our fate?

Did we raise an incessant incantation of "It can't be done?"

Did we waste our time looking for someone to blame?

We did not.

Together, we did what Oregonians have done since the days of our ancestors -- native, pioneer or emigrant.

We faced our problems head on. We rolled up our sleeves. And, together, we went to work to make things better for our people and our state.

Together, we have climbed far from the depths we were in just eight short years ago.

Standing before you today, I can honestly report that the state of our great state is sound. It is healthy. It is strong.

Yes, it can be better still -- and without question, it will be.

I could take this opportunity today to recount the many successes we have achieved during the past eight years.

I could talk at length about Oregon's economy, and how well it is recovering from the devastating slump we experienced early in my first term.

I could remind you how strong our traditional resource industries -- timber, agriculture and fisheries -- continue to be, despite those who warned of doom and gloom.

I could recount my foreign trade missions, and the very tangible results they have already achieved.

I could spend this time talking about our higher education system, and how it has blossomed into a critical component of our state's economic strategy.

I could remind you of the crises we have avoided, or the problems we have prevented from turning into disasters.

That is probably the sort of thing you expect from a speech on the "state of the state."

But I have something else to talk about today.

Those of us in government tend to talk in terms of policies and programs, agencies and legislation.

But I tell you that no policy, no program, no agency or law could make one iota of difference were it not for people.

I am not being immodest when I say that I have probably met and talked with more individual Oregonians than any Governor before me.

As a matter of fact, I say that with enormous pride.

You have heard about the two weeks a year, on the average, that I spent traveling abroad on behalf of Oregon investment and trade. Those were important trips that will bear fruit for years to come.

But you may not know that, over the past eight years, I also logged a quarter of a million miles on the highways and byways of our own state.

I visited every city in Oregon, and countless smaller towns.

I visited fairs in every one of Oregon's 36 counties -- some of them more than once.

I took part in hundreds of memorable community celebrations, including:

- * Independence Day in Hillsboro...
- * Loyalty Days in Lincoln City ...
- * The Pendleton Roundup...
- * Veterans Day in Albany ...

...and what may be the world's shortest parade, the one that marks the opening of the annual fair in Fossil.

Back at my office in Salem, countless Oregonians and visitors to our state stopped by the open houses I held as often as five days a week.

And I met with reporters from Oregon's news media at least once a week -- more often than any governor before me.

Some governors might find this aspect of the job boring or bothersome.

I did not. Far from it.

I know that, in the years to come, people will ask me what I miss most about this very public life.

And I know the answer that will spring instantly to mind.

Not the power, such as it is. Not the excitement of the political process. Not the sense of being part of events larger than myself. Not even the presidents and world leaders I have met.

No, what I will miss most will be the people of my state: Honest, hard-working people from all walks of life, who have confirmed for me that Oregonians are truly a breed apart.

You know, we in Oregon spend a lot of time talking about our natural resources and fighting to protect them. And it is true, we are blessed with an abundance of natural wonders. We can, and must take care of them.

But sometimes we forget that Oregon's greatest natural resource is its people.

Let me take a few minutes to tell you about some of those people. Their stories -- human stories -- say more about Vic Atiyeh's political philosophy than any list of programs or policies that I could give to you.

A week ago today, three teenagers paid me a visit: Sara Bagg, John Meighan (MEE-han) and Brent Schlosser.

Theirs was not a courtesy call. You see, these young people are students at Estacada High School, which shut its doors one month ago today because voters there rejected an operating levy.

I am happy to report that those voters changed their minds last week, and the Estacada schools are open this morning.

But Sara, John and Brent know that the situation in their town is a symptom of a larger, statewide problem.

That is the problem of keeping the doors open in the dozens of Oregon school districts that are limping along on antiquated tax bases -- or no tax base at all.

These Estacada youths know that fully half of the school children in Oregon face the same risk of school closure that they do.

They were very interested in my school stabilization plan, which will be introduced early in the Legislative session.

Very simply, that plan would give every school district in Oregon an up-to-date tax base, reflecting the previous year's voter-approved levy.

No, my plan would not resolve the complex issues of tax reform.

But I do know -- and I told those young people -- that we have to start somewhere.

That somewhere is with our schools, which are absolutely essential to the state of our state, now and in the future.

School financing is the single most important issue facing the new Legislature, and the new governor, when they take office next week.

If I leave office with any regret, it is that this sword still hangs over the heads of our children.

But there are many other issues I look back on with satisfaction and pride.

For instance: Oregon's JOBS program, administered by Adult and Family Services.

Some people refer to this program as "workfare." It is not that at all.

Rather, it is a way to get people off of public assistance and let them earn a living of their own.

States such as Washington and Massachusetts are getting a lot of media mileage out of their "workfare" programs. But none has achieved the success that Oregon has, no matter how you measure it.

Month by month, we find jobs for 25 percent more welfare recipients than the state of Massachusetts does. We do this despite the fact that they have nearly four times as many clients, and a much lower unemployment rate than we do.

And we find those jobs at about one-third the cost to taxpayers.

I credit Oregon's success to the basic attitude that underlies the JOBS program -- an attitude I firmly endorse.

Some take the approach: "Look at those no-good, lazy people, out there taking my hard-earned money. Let's get them off welfare."

We say: "These are human beings who deserve to keep their human dignity, self-esteem and pride. Our job is to help them through this crisis in their lives -- to help them find a way to take care of themselves."

Consider the young woman I will call "Jan." A mother of two, she went on public assistance after spending a year looking for work in her Western Oregon home town.

"Jan" was first referred to a job in the laundry of a local nursing home. She was not very excited about the work, but she was willing to take just about any job.

Then an alert JOBS staffer learned that "Jan" had once worked as a nursing assistant. The staff member urged her to apply for certification.

She did. Her employer let her challenge the certification test, and she passed. The nursing home promoted her. Today "Jan" is working fulltime, she is off welfare -- and she loves her job.

I am proud that Oregon has been able to help people like "Jan" get their feet back under them. They, too, are valuable pieces of our human resource heritage.

We have tried to do as much for others who are less than fortunate: the elderly, the disabled, the children who lack loving families of their own.

We have all read the sad stories of homeless children, bounced from one caretaker to another, growing up without guidance and love.

Our Children's Services Division and the hundreds of foster families in Oregon have helped hundreds of those children find the care and security they need and deserve.

Sometimes that means extraordinary efforts, as in the horrifying case of a four-year-old girl I will call "Susan."

It is terrible to imagine, but "Susan's" own mother had doused this tiny girl with gasoline and set her on fire.

Even after repeated surgery, "Susan" was left with serious physical scars -- not to mention the emotional ones.

CSD staff members made more than 100 telephone calls all over the nation, and spent hundreds of hours on the case. But they finally found a permanent, adoptive home for that little girl.

People like those CSD workers obviously see their state service as more than just a job. They put their hearts and souls into the welfare of Oregon's least fortunate.

I have found people like that in every office of state government.

It is popular, especially among politicians who are running for office, to beat up on state government.

But after 28 years in public office, I can tell you with authority that Oregon state government is not a collection of faceless bureaucrats.

It is people:

- * People who, during the holidays just passed, donated hundreds of brand-new toys to bring Christmas to needy children.

- * People who contribute hundreds of thousands of dollars every year to the United Way and other fund drives in their local communities.

- * People who each year donate thousands of pounds of food to feed the hungry.

- * People who, on their own time, volunteer uncounted hours to Red Cross blood drives, Scouting and other youth groups, senior citizen centers and so many other causes.

It has been my privilege as governor to know and work with them.

They remind me again of something I said during my first inaugural address, eight years ago this very week.

I said then:

"The increasing role of government in our lives has been a temptation to abandon our sense of community.

"Instead of caring for one another, we hire government to do the job...

"Our tax dollars have too often been used to buy escape from personal responsibility, and we are the poorer for it."

I coupled those thoughts with a challenge.

I asked Oregonians to back their demands for less government and lower taxes with "a commitment to do for each other -- in person -- much of what we have been asking government to do for us."

I am proud to say that you have risen to that challenge.

We need only look around us to see the results.

All over our state, Oregonians are working -- singly or on groups -- to improve the lives of their fellow citizens.

It has been my privilege to recognize some of those people through my annual Voluntarism Awards, which I launched in 1983.

We have honored volunteers such as Lorraine Reed, of Monmouth, who has given her time to meet the human needs of the elderly, of children and of women in prison, among others.

Or the employees of United Telephone Company, in Hood River, who play a critical part in their community's United Way campaign and other drives.

Or the Flea-Market Committee in the tiny Wallowa County town of Lostine. Ten years ago, they held a flea market to raise money for their town's Bicentennial celebration. Today, that event has grown to a community festival that helps all sorts of local causes.

Along with the challenge I issued eight years ago, I made a promise.

I promised to set myself a high standard of performance in everything I did as your Governor.

Just as you have met my challenge, I believe that I have lived up to my promise.

In everything I have done for Oregon, I have tried to stick to my personal ideals of honesty, integrity and straight-forwardness.

It all goes back to a discussion I had in 1958, shortly after I first decided to run for public office.

A friend and I were talking about how you run a political campaign.

I said then, "I think you have to tell the people who you are, what you believe in -- and if they like what they see, they will elect you."

In 20 elections over 28 years, I guess Oregonians liked what they saw.

Yes, I could have spent my short time with you today recounting our successes during the past eight years.

But those successes are not what the issue.

The real issue during the past eight years, and the issue we must consider as we look ahead, is a simple one:

It is this: How do Oregonians want to deal with the challenges they face?

Do they want to seek guidance from Salem?

Or should it work the other way around?

I think you know where I stand.

I truly believe that good government comes, not from the top down, but from the people.

Since my first campaign for office, I have tried to listen to those people: the people who live and work and dream in our great state.

I have listened when they told me what they wanted their government to do -- or not to do.

To the best of my ability, I have tried to follow their desires.

Because, in my heart of hearts, I believe that Oregonians know what is best for them.

That is the real genius of our Democracy: Its people.

In this 200th anniversary year of our Constitution, that is worth remembering.

Like those who wrote the Constitution, I believe in the people of our great nation -- and our great state.

There are politicians who do not feel this way: The elitists who think they know better than you do what is good for you.

Resist them. It is your government, your state. Do not let anyone take it away from you.

So much lies ahead for Oregon, in both the near and distant future.

* We must find a way to stabilize our schools so they can get on with the business of educating our young.

* We must do something about the high cost of insurance that threatens to destroy our small businesses and volunteer groups.

* We must come up with fair and reasonable plans for protecting our forests, our water and all our other natural resources.

* We must encourage our businesses, from the smallest to the largest, to thrive, grow and keep providing jobs for Oregonians.

* We absolutely must find ways to prevent the ills of our society before they choke us to death. I am talking about drug and alcohol abuse, child abuse, homelessness and crime.

Oregon can only meet these challenges if its people take the lead.

Sometimes their decisions take time, and struggle, and arguing back and forth.

The process is not always as swift and tidy as the professional bureaucrats would like.

And, to be honest, sometimes it can be frustrating for those of us in government to sit back and let the will of the people work.

But if you truly believe in the wisdom and courage of the people, as I do, those moments pass.

People ask me now: "What is the state of our state?"

I can only repeat: The state of Oregon is the state of its people.

They are strong. They are optimistic. They are ready for whatever the future will bring.

Pardon me now if I speak for a moment from my heart.

As I prepare to leave office just one week from today, many people ask what I plan to do with myself.

And they ask me, "How do you feel about your years in public service?"

To the first question, the answer is simple. Dolores and I have spent the past few months packing to come home to Washington County.

Next Monday, after the inauguration, I will get in my car and drive home.

After I have had a chance to get some rest, I will get back to work as a private citizen, doing what I can to make Oregon a better place to live.

Will I miss state government?

Probably.

Because -- although the responsibility is awesome -- the opportunity is limitless, the honor rare and the gift of service priceless.

Am I sorry to leave?

Not really.

Because I know I am leaving the future of Oregon in the good hands: the hands of Oregonians.

What I will miss most, as I have said, is the daily contact with Oregonians from all walks of life, in all corners of our state.

They have given me enough warm memories to last a lifetime, and for that I am profoundly grateful.

Some have asked what legacy I hope to leave behind.

That, of course, will be judged by history.

But I hope the footnotes will say that Victor Atiyeh truly cared about his job as an elected official, about our system of government and about the people of Oregon.

As to the rest, I can only repeat something that one of my personal heroes, Abraham Lincoln, once said:

"I do the very best I know how -- the very best I can; and I mean to keep on doing so until the end. If the end brings me out right, what is said against me won't amount to anything. If the end brings me out wrong, ten thousand angels swearing I was right wouldn't make any difference."

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