Written by George E. Curry, NNPA Editor-in-Chief
Thursday, 14 February 2013 19:25

WASHINGTON (NNPA) – After laying out a progressive agenda for his second term in his inaugural address, President Obama followed up Tuesday night with a series of specific proposals in his State of the Union address that include increasing and indexing the minimum wage, repairing deteriorated infrastructure, and investing in education and clean energy.

"It is our unfinished task to restore the basic bargain that built this country – the idea that if you work hard and meet your responsibilities, you can get ahead, no matter where you come from, what you look like, or who you love," Obama said in his first address to a joint session of Congress since his re-election to a second term. "It is our unfinished task to make sure that this government works on behalf of the many, and not just the few; that it encourages free enterprise, rewards individual initiative, and opens the doors of opportunity to every child across this great nation."

Obama also announced that another 34,000 American troops will be withdrawn from Afghanistan by next February, down from 66,000. He said by the end of 2014, the war will be over.

The president began his speech by noting some major accomplishments of his first term.

"Tonight, thanks to the grit and determination of the American people, there is much progress to

report. After a decade of grinding war, our brave men and women in uniform are coming home. After years of grueling recession, our businesses have created over 6 million new jobs. We buy more American cars than we have in five years, and less foreign oil than we have in 20. Our housing market is healing, our stock market is rebounding, and consumers, patients, and homeowners enjoy stronger protections than ever before. Together, we have cleared away the rubble of crisis, and can say with renewed confidence that the state of our union is stronger."

But not strong enough, the president acknowledged.

"... We gather here knowing that there are millions of Americans whose hard work and dedication have not yet been rewarded," he said. "Our economy is adding jobs – but too many people still can't find full-time employment. Corporate profits have rocketed to all-time highs – but for more than a decade, wages and incomes have barely budged. It is our generation's task, then, to reignite the true engine of America's economic growth – a rising, thriving middle class."

Referring to the poor, Obama called for building "new ladders of opportunity into the middle class for all who are willing to climb them."
One of those ladders would be raising the minimum wage from $7.25 an hour to $9 an hour by the end of 2015, a move White House officials said would be part of an effort to lift as many as 15 million people out of poverty.

"Tonight, let's declare that in the wealthiest nation on Earth, no one who works full-time should have to live in poverty, and raise the federal minimum wage to $9 an hour," he said. "This single step would raise the incomes of millions of working families. It could mean the difference between groceries or the food bank; rent or eviction; scraping by or finally getting ahead. For businesses across the country, it would mean customers with more money in their pockets. In fact, working folks shouldn't have to wait year after year for the minimum wage to go up while CEO pay has never been higher. So here's an idea that Gov. Romney and I actually agreed on last year: let's tie the minimum wage to the cost of living, so that it finally becomes a wage you can live on.

Also addressing the jobs issue, Obama said: "A year and a half ago, I put forward an American Jobs Act that independent economists said would create more than 1 million new jobs. I thank the last Congress for passing some of that agenda, and I urge this Congress to pass the rest."

The president did not call for cap on carbon emissions, as some environmentalists had hoped, but promised to increase fuel efficiency of vehicles and double renewable energy.

Obama also proposed a "Fix-It-First" program that would put people to work on infrastructure projects, such as repairing bridges and roads across the country.

Senator Marco Rubio (R-Fla.) said in his Republican response, "Presidents in both parties ... have known that our free-enterprise economy is the source of our middle-class prosperity. But President Obama? He believes it's the cause of our problems."

President Obama announced that he is appointing a non-partisan commission to improve voting

in the U.S.

"We must all do our part to make sure our God-given rights are protected here at home. That includes our most fundamental right as citizens: the right to vote. When any Americans – no matter where they live or what their party – are denied that right simply because they can't wait for five, six, seven hours just to cast their ballot, we are betraying our ideals."

It is unclear whether Obama can get his domestic proposals passed in the Republican-controlled House of Representatives.

In a speech that focused primarily on reinvigorating the economy, President Obama expressed a willingness to make some changes to key social programs, but none that would destroy them.

"... We can't ask senior citizens and working families to shoulder the entire burden of deficit reduction while asking nothing more from the wealthiest and most powerful. We won't grow the middle class simply by shifting the cost of health care or college onto families that are already struggling, or by forcing communities to lay off more teachers, cops, and firefighters. Most Americans – Democrats, Republicans, and Independents – understand that we can't just cut our way to prosperity. They know that broad-based economic growth requires a balanced approach to deficit reduction, with spending cuts and revenue, and with everybody doing their fair share. And that's the approach I offer tonight," President Obama said.

"On Medicare, I'm prepared to enact reforms that will achieve the same amount of health care savings by the beginning of the next decade as the reforms proposed by the bipartisan Simpson-Bowles commission. Already, the Affordable Care Act is helping to slow the growth of health care costs. The reforms I'm proposing go even further. We'll reduce taxpayer subsidies to prescription drug companies and ask more from the wealthiest seniors. We'll bring down costs by changing the way our government pays for Medicare, because our medical bills shouldn't be based on the number of tests ordered or days spent in the hospital – they should be based on the quality of care that our seniors receive. And I am open to additional reforms from both parties, so long as they don't violate the guarantee of a secure retirement."

With families touched by gun violence looking on, the president urged Congress to enact new gun legislation.

"Each of these proposals deserves a vote in Congress," he said. "If you want to vote no, that's your choice. But these proposals deserve a vote. Because in the two months since Newtown, more than a thousand birthdays, graduations, and anniversaries have been stolen from our lives by a bullet from a gun."

One of those bullets struck close to home – literally.

"One of those we lost was a young girl named Hadiya Pendleton. She was 15 years old. She loved Fig Newtons and lip gloss. She was a majorette. She was so good to her friends, they all thought they were her best friend. Just three weeks ago, she was here, in Washington, with her classmates, performing for her country at my inauguration. And a week later, she was shot and

killed in a Chicago park after school, just a mile away from my house," he said. "Hadiya's parents, Nate and Cleo, are in this chamber tonight, along with more than two dozen Americans whose lives have been torn apart by gun violence. They deserve a vote.

"Gabby Giffords deserves a vote.

"The families of Newtown deserve a vote.

"The families of Aurora deserve a vote.

"The families of Oak Creek, and Tucson, and Blacksburg, and the countless other communities ripped open by gun violence – they deserve a simple vote."

And, the president said, children deserve a quality education.

"Tonight, I propose working with states to make high-quality preschool available to every child in America," Obama said. "Every dollar we invest in high-quality early education can save more than seven dollars later on – by boosting graduation rates, reducing teen pregnancy, even reducing violent crime."

President Obama called on Congress to pass immigration reform.

"Real reform means establishing a responsible pathway to earned citizenship – a path that includes passing a background check, paying taxes and a meaningful penalty, learning English, and going to the back of the line behind the folks trying to come here legally," President Obama said. "And real reform means fixing the legal immigration system to cut waiting periods, reduce bureaucracy, and attract the highly-skilled entrepreneurs and engineers that will help create jobs and grow our economy."