GOVERNOR'S OFFICE

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GOVERNOR O'NEILL'S BUDGET ADDRESS

Mr. Speaker, Mr. President, Reverend Clergy, ladies and
gentlemen of the House and Senate, good people of Connecticut:

It is again an honor for me to address this combined
assembly, and to bring before you the budget for the coming
fiscal year. It is a special pleasure for me to do so this
year in this magnificent setting.

For months now, from down the hall I have heard the
hammering and sawing and drilling as workers hurried to ready
the chamber for this day-- and think we can agree here this
afternoon that all the hard work was worthwhile!

As I look out upon this splendid hall-- and indeed this
Capitol as a whole--I am reminded emphatically of the great
trust and faith invested in us by the people of Connecticut.
In these vast and extraordinary rooms, we are asked to
accomplish extraordinary things.

We are urged to serve each of our citizens and all of our
citizens. We are asked to perform the difficult task of
seeking compromise out of conflict. And almost every day--in
full public view--we are obliged to test the courage of our
convictions--and our commitments to the people of this state.

As we gather here in 1988, in the 350th anniversary year of
this distinguished and historic Assembly, I hope that you and I
can rededicate ourselves to our common task--and renew our
efforts on behalf of those whom we represent.

Certainly, we have made much progress in recent years.
This chamber has rung with landmark legislation of a scope and
a promise rarely seen in all those years since 1638. We have
been able to make the most of our prosperity, and this year I
believe we will do the same.

As I reflect upon the course of events in recent years, I
realize that we here in Connecticut--in the gains of the
private sector, in the performance of our state government, and
in our own daily lives-- have attained a high and steady level
of achievement--a plateau, if you will, in our fortunes.

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This plateau is a lofty place—a place of prosperity and fulfillment for most of our citizens. It hosts a society in which the young are increasingly well-educated, in which the elderly are provided decent care, and in which those who seek jobs are by and large able to find jobs.

And while there remain regions of shadow and despair that we must continue to fight, we can say that Connecticut—because of its ability to think hard and work hard—enjoys a way of life much envied, not only by other states, but in the world at large.

From the stable heights of our prosperity, we can look back upon the many roads that got us here. And as we look back, we can see that Connecticut has just experienced several years of exceptional growth. Our economy has expanded dramatically. In the past five years, our workforce has grown by some 237,000 jobs, as many new and existing enterprises have found Connecticut to be fertile ground for growth.

We have seen historic lows in our unemployment rates and equally historic peaks in the productivity of our workforce and in the size of our workers' paychecks.

Never before, in fact, have so many of our citizens been so able to enjoy the abundant riches that Life in Connecticut has to offer.

In all of this, the state has been a strong and steady partner. I have always maintained that if we, as a society, are to accomplish any lasting good, we must first have jobs for our citizens. Today, Connecticut has jobs, its people are working, and we, as a result, are accomplishing a great deal.

But our mission today is not to look behind us; it is to look ahead. Our task from this day forward into spring will be to fashion a budget that is decent and fair—one that is responsive to the needs of our citizens while remaining responsible to their ability to pay.

The budget that I submit to you today and that I urge you to adopt is, I believe, a common sense document. It professes a basic faith that the road we have been travelling is a good one—and the right one for Connecticut's future.

With this budget in hand, we can look the people of this state in the eye and say: our word to you is good. We have promised you consistency and stability in government and that is what we have given you.

And for the fifth year in a row, I can stand before you and say: this budget does not contain a general tax increase!

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In essence, it follows my long-held belief, and a belief deeply ingrained in the Yankee heritage of this state, that we should do what we can afford to do. As I stand before you in 1988, this, I propose, is what the State of Connecticut can afford to do—and indeed is obliged to do if we are to continue on our steady course through the uncertainties of the economy at large.

Yes, there is uncertainty ahead. The view from our plateau is not cloudless. One dark day last October showed us how quickly and how thickly the clouds can gather. And although Connecticut was reasonably well-prepared for that day, we have felt its effects. We also continue to feel the sting of the many federal program cuts and the disgraceful federal budget deficits.

Largely because of these overriding issues, our economic picture is not as bright as it was a year ago. We are no longer flush with revenues. The days of the huge budget surpluses are over, at least for now.

But even as the economic picture shifts, our commitments to the people of Connecticut remain. Our commitments to the continued strength and vitality and unity of Connecticut society remain. And, ladies and gentlemen of this Assembly, I intend to honor those commitments!

We must move forward with our sweeping pledge to excellence in education. Already in its short life, this program has generated real improvements. It is bringing more highly-qualified teachers into our system, where they will help our children to achieve and excel in an ever-more competitive world.

We must continue the massive rebuilding of our roads and bridges. This is another program that is showing daily progress as it re-establishes the Connecticut highway system as the backbone of our economy.

We must continue to increase the aid we send back into our cities and towns! In this budget, I am proposing that the state spend more than $2 billion on aid to or on behalf of the towns—that's $2 billion that will help keep local property taxes from crippling local economies—and it's a 100% increase over what the state returned to the towns just five years ago.

In essence, this budget honors all our present commitments and funds all our current programs—because, taken together, they are what make Connecticut work.

These are commitments we've made, and they are commitments we must keep.

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We owe as much to the elderly, whose lives are greatly eased by our CONNPACE prescription drug program;
To those with disabilities, who must be allowed full access to and within Connecticut society;
To those who wage the difficult fight against drug and alcohol abuse; and
To our hopeful college students who are unable to make up for federal pullbacks in financial aid.

We must not use economic uncertainty as an excuse to punish those among us who need or who have earned our support. If we pull the plug on any one of these programs, we not only drain hope from a segment of our population, but we threaten the very balance that allows our society to remain stable and secure from top to bottom.

And yet, there are some areas in which we must go beyond our present programs in order to break new and needed ground. As I have indicated, our new initiatives are not extensive this year. They amount to less than 2 percent of our overall budget. But in each case, I believe they address a critical need in our state.

As a result of the collapse at L'Ambiance Plaza in Bridgeport last spring, and in response to my Commission's report, I will be asking for legislation that will strengthen virtually every aspect of the building process in Connecticut. We must ensure that the memorial built near the site of that tragedy will also signify an end to unsafe practices, carelessness, and lack of oversight in the state's construction industry.

I have begun to address the crisis in the nursing profession as well. I will propose the easing of unnecessarily strict regulations that, in effect, prevent out-of-state nurses from coming to work in Connecticut. We will find the ways and the means to bring strength back to this noble and too-long-neglected profession.

We must continue forth with our plans to add some 2,500 new prison beds to our overburdened corrections system. It is of the highest importance that we send a message to those who would commit crimes in this state—and to the victims of those crimes—that criminals will not be sent back out on the street, they will be sent to jail—and they will stay in jail until their punishment fits their crime.

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This budget also continues our important battle against AIDS, an issue of great concern to all of us—on both sides of the aisle. Last fall, I made the subject of AIDS and what it could mean to the future public health and safety of Connecticut the first priority of our new Human Services Cabinet. Today, I am asking that an additional $3 million be allocated to the fight, bringing our total to more than $12 million in the coming year.

These efforts, especially in public awareness, I hope will be instrumental in shifting the terrible course of this disease into something we can manage and even begin to turn back.

We must expand our efforts in the difficult struggle to bring affordable housing to the people of Connecticut—an issue that cuts across all levels of the state as no other issue.

I propose that we pledge $100 million for the further development and rehabilitation of affordable housing in the state, bringing that total to nearly $200 million in the last two years. We can make this money available—and we will—but it remains up to the towns and cities and the builders in Connecticut to find the wisdom and the imagination and the guts necessary to take this money and put it to work.

In addition, we must expand upon the great successes of our Rental Assistance Program for low-income families, and we must build upon our achievements in not only sheltering the homeless, but in placing them in decent, permanent housing.

Last year, I stood before you and said housing is an inalienable right of all our citizens. This year, I propose we bring the dream closer to reality for those among us whose struggle has been especially bitter. We must increase our Aid to Families with Dependent Children by $50 a month so that those who receive no rental support will be better able to afford decent housing and a decent chance in life.

Our budget must also demonstrate concern for our home in a broader sense—our environment. Beyond our continuing commitment to landmark programs in clean water and clean air, we must recognize—with the commissioning of a permanent, fully-staffed floating laboratory—that the cleanliness and continued well-being of the Long Island Sound is essential to the health of all of us.

Also, in our ever-more crowded state, we must assure that our quality of life in Connecticut—the life we love—will never be crowded out of existence. Therefore, I urge that we redouble our efforts to preserve and maintain our precious and beautiful system of state parks, forests, and fish and wildlife facilities. And, to take this push a giant step further, I propose that we significantly expand our network of public lands with a $100 million commitment to open space purchases over the next five years.

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If we are to speak of guarding our resources, we must also make room in this budget for our most precious resource. If we truly wish to assure Connecticut's continuing strength, we must be willing to provide for the needs of our children.

We are doing a great deal in our schools, of course, but we must also recognize that—as the family structure evolves and, in many cases, weakens—our children need help out of school, too.

We must assure that our Department of Children and Youth Services is adequately staffed and funded to do the job—the sometimes impossible job—that the people of this state expect it to do.

We must make every effort to provide strength and encouragement to unstable families. We must properly staff the battle against child abuse and child neglect. We must support with increased training and money the efforts of the foster and adoptive parents of troubled youths.

And while we recognize that whatever comfort and care and guidance we can provide through our programs make a poor substitute for parental love, we must never choose to deny our support and extinguish the light of hope in these young lives.

All of this we must do, and will do, within a framework of fiscal soundness. The budget I submit to you today is a solidly balanced document, both in its intent and in its fiscal underpinnings.

And as I submit to you this responsible budget today, I am also pursuing measures that will assure continued fiscal responsibility in the years ahead.

I have already acted in one key area, as you know, with the unveiling last month of the "Fair Audits, Increased Revenues" program of the Department of Revenue Services—a program that will mean the permanent addition of at least $90 million a year—and possibly much more—to our tax base. I promise to you that we will continue to be tough and aggressive and innovative in assuring that out-of-state corporations pay their fair share of taxes—so that our own companies and our own citizens don't have to pay more than what is fair.

On another front, I have repeatedly encouraged the cooperation between the public and private sectors as we continue to seek efficient, money-saving solutions to difficult problems. This past year saw such cooperation—and saved the state millions of dollars—in programs dealing with illiteracy, the housing shortage, long-term health care, and economic development, to name a few. Further cooperation of this type will be needed and actively sought by my administration in the years ahead.

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Additionally, I believe there is more cooperation at this time within state government than at any other time in my memory. I feel that the citizens of Connecticut are fortunate to have working for them an exceptionally bright and able group of Commissioners who understand that today's complex problems often overlap traditional boundaries—and demand other than traditional responses.

Finally, we must prepare now for whatever changes the future of our economy will bring. We must support programs that will train our citizens for the world to come rather than the world that is passing by now. We must continue to back Connecticut's wise and creative participation in the global marketplace.

Along these lines, I will soon be announcing significant changes in our state business loan programs. These changes will represent the first step in a major new economic strategy that I hope will encourage Connecticut business to continue to excel worldwide as innovators and job creators in the years to come.

We must do all of this now so that we can participate just as richly in the next era of prosperity as we have in the current one. But we must remember that whatever programs we design, whatever plans for the future we devise, Connecticut's economic successes were, are, and always will be due to the ingenuity, the ability, and the solid work habits of the Connecticut people.

Let us continue on our historic course, then.

As the wild winds blow on Wall Street, as waves of panic continue to grip the world money markets, as uncertainty rules the day in Washington, let Connecticut move safely and surely into the future. Let us build our society and our economy as we always have—with care, with confidence, and with a conscience. And let us do so for this great state, not because I am the Governor or because you are its General Assembly, but because Connecticut is our home.

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