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Georgia Gov. Brian Kemp tells business group he wants to spend \$1.8 billion more on infrastructure



Georgia Governor Brian Kemp delivers a speech at the Georgia Chamber of Commerce in Atlanta on Wednesday, Jan. 10, 2024. Kemp told the business group that he'll propose \$1.8 billion in additional spending on infrastructure, as well as expand health care training for dentists and physicians, showing how the state's \$11 billion in surplus cash is giving the Republican the power to spend big even as state revenues slow. (Matthew Pearson/WABE via AP)

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Georgia Gov. Brian Kemp speaks during the Georgia Chamber of Commerce's "Eggs and Issues" breakfast at Mercedes Benz Stadium in Atlanta, Wednesday, Jan. 10, 2024. Kemp told a business group on Wednesday that he'll propose \$1.8 billion in additional spending on infrastructure, as well as expand health care training for dentists and physicians, showing how the state's \$11 billion in surplus cash is giving the Republican the power to spend big even as state revenues slow. (Natrice Miller/Atlanta Journal-Constitution via AP)



Georgia Speaker of the House Jon Burns speaks during the Georgia Chamber's "Eggs and Issues" breakfast at Mercedes Benz Stadium in Atlanta, Wednesday, Jan. 10, 2024. (Natrice Miller/Atlanta Journal-Constitution via AP)

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ATLANTA (AP) — Georgia Gov. Brian Kemp said Wednesday he'll propose \$1.8 billion in added spending on infrastructure, as well as expand health care training for dentists and physicians, showing how the state's \$11 billion in surplus cash is giving the Republican clout to spend big even as state revenues slow.

Kemp also told the Georgia Chamber of Commerce at a meeting at Mercedes-Benz Stadium in Atlanta that he'll need more than a year to follow through on a pledge to limit lawsuits. He also wants to make it harder for workers to unionize at the big developments Georgia is subsidizing.

"If we want to maintain this incredible position we're in today for another generation, we need to make smart moves right now to secure that future," Kemp said, arguing his plans would keep Georgia's economy humming.

Wednesday's speech by the second-term incumbent was a meaty preview of Thursday's looming State of the State address. Kemp promised more to come in the address, including a likely proposal to raise pay for public employees and teachers.

Kemp says he wants to allot \$1.5 billion to the Georgia Department of Transportation before June 30 to speed planned roadwork and establish a freight infrastructure program. Of that money, \$200 million would go to cities and counties, increasing what the state sends local governments to maintain their own roads and bridges.

Kemp said he also wants to invest another \$250 million in the Georgia Environmental Finance Authority, which loans money to local governments for water and sewer projects. Kemp previously gave out \$442 million in water and sewer grants using federal COVID-19 aid.

The governor wants to allot another \$50 million to a fund to develop land for housing, and then spend at least \$6 million annually on such grants going forward. Lawmakers earlier allotted \$35.7 million for Kemp's "rural workforce housing" plan, and \$17 million has been spent so far.

Kemp proposed spending \$178 million to create a new public dental school at Georgia Southern University in Savannah, in addition to the current Dental College of Georgia at Augusta University. Kemp also proposed \$50 million to create a separate medical school at the University of Georgia in Athens. Now, a four-year medical program operates there in partnership with the Medical College of Georgia at Augusta University.

"With these new assets on the way, we will further address the growing need for health care professionals in our state," Kemp said.

Like he did before the chamber in Athens this summer, Kemp argued lawsuits are driving up insurance premiums and hampering business.

"I will be introducing legislation this year that reflects my priorities to stabilize the market for insurers, stabilize premiums for Georgia families, and level the playing field in our courtrooms so we can continue to create even more quality, good-paying jobs," he said.

But Kemp now says the effort will take more than one legislative session, promising to take "the first step" this year.

Georgia Chamber President and CEO Chris Clark said after the speech that limiting lawsuits has “always been a difficult issue” to make progress on. He said this year’s steps would include a study to determine “the true impact of these nuclear verdicts” on insurance rates.

Kemp also promised to make it harder for workers to form unions to bargain with employers in Georgia, echoing the chamber’s own agenda. Kemp seeks to bar any business that benefits from state business incentives from allowing employees to unionize without a formal election. Now, businesses can accept unions without an election.

Only 4.4% of Georgia workers are union members, the eighth-lowest rate among states. Unions did win a notable victory in May when workers at Georgia school bus maker Blue Bird Corp. voted to be represented by the United Steelworkers.

Kemp portrayed the move as protecting workers’ “right to opportunity” from President Joe Biden’s pro-union agenda and outside forces “who want nothing more than to see the free market brought to a screeching halt.”

Burns said he wants to further cut taxes by increasing the deduction for a child on state income taxes from \$3,000 to \$4,000, which would save a typical family about \$45. He also is seeking a slight cut in property taxes.

Burns also said he wants to boost the number of state troopers from 700 to 1,000 and expand state-paid prekindergarten classes.



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