

## Senate GOP leader Andy McElhany's opening-day remarks for the 2008 session

Mr. President, Mr. Majority Leader, fellow colleagues: I am honored to stand before you once again representing the Republicans in the Colorado Senate. I am also pleased to see the many friends and family members who have joined us here this morning, including my wife Anna Marie and daughter Sarah.

Let me start by acknowledging a member of my caucus who could NOT be here: Senator Steve Ward, of Littleton, who is a colonel in the U.S. Marine Reserves. He was called up to active duty in Iraq, and we understand he will be back with us soon in this chamber. We thank him for his service to our country, and we wish him success in his mission as well as a safe return.

Let's also welcome two new Senate members: Dan Gibbs and Bill Cadman. They of course are replacing former President Fitz-Gerald and former Senator May. These two youthful gentlemen add new skill and talent. And they bring us vigor and enthusiasm, which is always welcome—and some would say, in short supply—in the upper chamber.

Unfortunately, this development also represents something of a setback for Senate Republicans. Some of you may recall that, last year, the Senate Republican press office posted an article on our Website titled, “‘Geezer caucus’ no more; Senate GOP younger than Dems.” At that time, the average age of all Senate Republicans was a year younger than that of Senate Democrats. We thought that was newsworthy because, for some reason, Republicans have been typecast as a bunch of grumpy old men. I don't know why. It is an unfair and unfounded cliché, and we wanted to set the record straight.

Well, it pains and humbles me to inform you today that we have done the math, and the addition of Senator Gibbs to the ranks of Senate Democrats has turned the tables on us: Democrats are now younger on average by one year.

That is disappointing, but our consolation will come when Senator Gibbs finds out that service in this body can pile years on you very quickly. It may surprise you to know, Senator Gibbs, that *I* looked like *you* do now when I entered the Senate just eight sessions ago. Savor those boyish looks while you can.

Congratulations are in order to Senator Peter Groff on being elected Senate president. It has been a true pleasure serving with Peter, and I look forward to him presiding over this chamber. He has earned everyone's respect as a man who is true to his word and who stands by his convictions. I must say that on some issues, he also has some pretty good ideas—despite his party affiliation. Senator Groff, you and I do not cross the aisle often when we're in this chamber, but let me assure you I will always regard you as a friend, and that will be true long after I leave this building for good.

Speaking of which, as many of you know, this will be my last session in the Senate. That is also the case for several of my colleagues: Senator Taylor as well as Senators Gordon, Hagedorn, Takis, Tupa and Windels. The citizens of Colorado, in their wisdom, amended the state constitution some time ago to make sure that we spend the rest of our productive days doing something else—in my case, probably fly-fishing. I am fine with that, but do not expect me to retire on the job. Quite the contrary, I fully expect my final session to be my most fulfilling one yet—and let me tell you why.

Republicans in the House and Senate have come together to propose a legislative plan of action for 2008 that takes up the major challenges voters sent us here to address. Many of you are by now familiar with our plan, which we've rolled out over the past few months. It represents a set of practical solutions to our most pressing problems—without shifting an even bigger burden onto the taxpaying public. This is not an attempt to cure all that ails Colorado in one fell swoop. This is a realistic effort to take sensible steps—and make some important strides—in the right direction.

You can find the details of the GOP's 2008 legislative agenda on the Senate Minority Office's Website, [coloradosenatenews.com](http://coloradosenatenews.com). Permit me to recap a few highlights.

On education, for example, we aim to raise the bar. That means higher standards, more options, quality teachers and safer schools. Like a groundbreaking bill by Senator Josh Penry and Representative Rob Witwer setting a statewide curriculum standard to graduate high school. Senator Mike Kopp and Representative Victor Mitchell are proposing a high school proficiency exam to graduate. Both efforts will ensure that a diploma really means something, whether a student is going to college or the job market. And Senator Nancy Spence and Representative Ken Summers will carry a bill to fund performance incentives that will help retain and reward our best and brightest teachers.

Our proposals for bridging the health-care gap are based on the understanding that most Coloradans already enjoy first-class care. Our goal should not be to take a wrecking ball to the current system but rather to expand coverage to many of those who do not have it and to curb spiraling costs confronting those who do. In some cases we can do that by removing regulatory barriers and expanding opportunities. That means passing a bill by Representative Spencer Swalm and Senator Steve Johnson to provide a low-cost option to Colorado's uninsured by creating a benefit plan with basic coverage for a low monthly premium. There is also a bill sponsored by Representative Cory Gardner and Senator Shawn Mitchell that would allow Coloradans to purchase more affordable insurance offered in other states where there are few mandates on coverage.

Our overburdened transportation network long has needed a steady, sustainable funding source. The business community that drives our economy knows it, and every member of this General Assembly ought to know it. Yet, the public appetite for paying more taxes and fees is very much in doubt. We all know that, too. The fact is, a lot of the funding we need for our highways already is flowing into state coffers—if only we'll stop siphoning it off to grow other programs. That is why Representatives Mike May and Kevin

Lundberg and I propose to dedicate and secure—in the state’s constitution—all auto-related tax revenue for transportation.

Our 2008 action plan takes up other basic concerns, too, like higher education. Senator Penry spent much of last year urging that we tap into soaring revenue from the state’s oil and gas boom to set up a permanent trust to fund our colleges and universities. Regarding illegal immigration, the least our citizens should be able to expect is that basic institutions like our elections are safeguarded from abuse. We are proposing a couple of bills that will see to that. And the unmatched natural beauty of Colorado’s environment could use better stewardship. Republican bills aim to lower hurdles and create incentives for everything from cleaner energy to improving our forests and parks.

We offer these and the rest of our proposals as a way to break through the logjam on policy making that comes with too many commissions consulting too many experts, resulting in too many reports. We appreciate all the effort, wisdom and knowledge that has gone into studying Colorado’s most vexing issues, but it is now time for some action.

We are making a good-faith effort to reach out across the aisle and to our governor as well. We believe there are significant elements in our plan that members of both parties can embrace. This is truly a foundation for bipartisan action. The governor has in fact already expressed support for some of the concepts embodied in our legislative agenda.

Just for example, in his *Colorado Promise*, Governor Ritter states, “*I will support efforts that provide performance incentives to teachers and principals based on growth gains and assignments in high-need schools and high-need academic subjects.*” So, let me take this opportunity to remind the governor that Senator Spence is carrying the bill that will do exactly what he wants done. I also call on him to help assure Senator Spence’s performance-incentive proposal gets safe passage through the Senate to his desk.

Again, the premise of our entire agenda is that Coloradans need practical, realistic solutions to the challenges facing us. It has been said before, and I’ll say it again: You don’t have to reinvent the wheel when you get a flat tire. You find the leak and fix it. Otherwise, you’ll get mired down in blue-ribbon panels, epic debates, starry-eyed schemes and back-breaking tax-and-fee hikes. And in the end, you still won’t solve the problem anyway.

A couple of other things in closing.

We have joined the business community in expressing our grave concern over the governor’s executive order last year granting unions unprecedented ability to organize state government personnel. The governor’s misguided decision to let unions collectively bargain for state employees’ salaries and benefits will, without a doubt, drive up the cost of government. We know this because it has happened in other states that have imposed collective bargaining.

Members of the General Assembly never had a chance to debate this ill-conceived policy, never had a chance to take testimony from experts and stakeholders and never had a chance to propose alternatives that would have achieved the governor's professed goal—improving workplace morale—without creating a new burden for taxpayers. That is why Senators Shawn Mitchell and Penry, along with Representatives Cory Gardner and Rob Witwer, will carry a measure repealing the governor's executive order.

The governor does deserve credit, though, for pledging to support a ban on strikes by public employees. Representative Bob Gardner and Senator Spence are sponsoring that measure. We trust the governor will sign it.

Finally, the governor is to be commended, by and large, for the modest economic-development agenda that he announced last fall. In fact, we liked one of the measures so much—expanding the exemption from the business personal property tax—that one of our own members co-sponsored it in the General Assembly last year, when it was killed.

However, it is pretty hard to reconcile this governor's professed concern for economic growth, and for the business community in particular, with his decision to raise property-tax bills last year on most Colorado homes and businesses. It is just as hard to reconcile his economic-development agenda with his support for a host of bills in the 2007 session that favored unions and trial lawyers over the businesses that create our jobs. That is no way to grow the economy.

In other words, in extending our hand to this governor to work with us on our plan for action, all we are really asking is that he come back to the center.

As I said, I do not intend to spend my last session taking it easy around here, but I also do not wish to pick fights. Our earnest hope is to work with this governor as well as the majority party in the legislature to make good policy. We will stand up for our principles, of course, but we also are ready to look for common ground. It probably will be easier to find if we start off the session searching for it together. Thank you.