

House Speaker Julie McCluskie

Opening Day Remarks as Prepared for Delivery:

Good morning members!

A warm welcome to the guests and dignitaries who have joined us, thank you for being here on opening day!

First off, I want to take a moment to recognize the veterans here today, and those currently in our armed services - both in the chamber and in the gallery. Please stand or wave. We thank you for your service.

I also want to be sure to give a huge thanks to the many people who keep this building and the legislature running: our aides and caucus staff, nonpartisan staff and clerks, our facility workers, and of course our sergeants.

And let's not forget our Chief Clerk's new Chief Responsibility – Baby Trevor! Congratulations to the Reilly family on your newest addition!

More good news - Love is in the air! Not only did Rep. Lukens receive a big diamond ring atop the cliffs of Ireland...

We also have some good news, from the press table for once – Seth, congratulations on your wedding! We all know that Hawaii can't possibly beat opening day at the Colorado State Capitol, so I'm sure it wasn't all that hard to get back on the plane.

A lot has happened since we last gathered here. Every year changes, some changes and some years can feel harder than others.

We are missing a colleague in our halls today. Senator Faith Winter served Colorado for twelve years before her tragic passing. I mourn her, as I miss her smile and warmth and her unwavering, steely dedication to fighting for what's right.

And last June, I saw with horror and a deep sadness that my friend, former Speaker Melissa Hortman and her husband Mark, had been shot and killed in

their home. Melissa had been a support to me personally, a political force for good, and someone truly dedicated to making her home state of Minnesota better every day.

Just months after Melissa's death, Charlie Kirk was shot and killed in front of a crowd in Utah.

Their murders crystalized even more powerfully for me that political violence is rising, and it flows downstream from the caustic rhetoric all around us.

No matter how bitterly we might disagree on the important issues, we have to raise the decency in our discourse, together.

I am heartened by the leaders on both sides who have had the courage to condemn political violence...violence can never be the price of democracy.

Before we move on, I want to acknowledge that there are others we have lost...family members, friends, and constituents who are no longer with us.

I invite everyone present to please stand if able, and take a moment of silence in recognition of those who have passed.

Thank you.

I love that we begin each legislative session at the start of the year. Just as our calendars flip to a new page, we come back to the Capitol with novel ideas, bright faces, and sometimes also a fresh blanket of snow. Fingers crossed on the last one – you know we need the moisture!

I also come back to this building each year with a different perspective. In the high country, we say that you never step in the same river twice. I think that's true of our time at the Capitol, too.

The river keeps moving, the challenges change.

Though the last year has been hard in so many ways, as I look at all of you today, I see resilience.

I see 65 representatives and dozens more staff who have faced real hardship – and have still shown up ready to work.

That commitment renews my sense of purpose today.

Today is the start of a new session. It is the start of 120 brand new days where we work together to make a difference.

We won't ignore the havoc outside these walls, or the gloom, or bury our heads in the sand to avoid discomfort.

But we will tune out the noise that's designed to capture attention for attention's sake. Coloradans have made it clear for years now that they simply do not care about the noise or performative outrage. They care about results.

And here, in our Colorado, we deliver real results.

Our Colorado is a bulwark against the chaos in Washington. Coloradans are looking for us to focus on what matters.

- What matters is that too many children live in poverty. And because of a single policy passed in this building, our Family Affordability Tax Credit, we cut child poverty by nearly 41% in one year – proof that it can be done.
- What matters is the \$800 million budget gap that puts safety net programs at risk and we must turn over every stone to find the funding to sustain them.
- What matters is protecting the rule of law and upholding justice for the dignity and rights of women, immigrants, LGBTQ Coloradans and working families.

What matters is that Coloradans' costs are too damn high.

That is why I am fortified by the resilience in your faces today.

We've got a steep mountain to skin, but the run will be worth it.

In August, we faced the fallout from Congress's budget, which immediately blew a billion dollar hole in Colorado's finances on top of new unprecedented threats to Medicaid, SNAP, TANF, and other essential services.

In this moment, when the White House would hold Colorado hostage, I'm reminded of a Churchill saying:

"You were given the choice between war and dishonor. You chose dishonor, and you will still have war."

I fear this administration will target Colorado no matter what we do. So members, let's do what's right.

It's plain that Colorado's fiscal constraints make it hard to pivot quickly when costs rise unexpectedly or revenues disappear overnight.

Medicaid costs are growing at twice the rate of what we are allowed to spend under TABOR, driven by long-term care for seniors, behavioral health services, and prescription drug costs – health care that every Coloradan might need.

To be clear, this deficit is not reckless overspending.

It is time to modernize our outdated fiscal structure, because our future shouldn't be bound by a 30-year-old formula that doesn't account for today's realities.

The math just isn't mathing for the people of our state.

No one is coming to the rescue during our session. There are no easy buttons. Balancing this budget will require shared sacrifice and serious leadership.

To the members of the Joint Budget Committee, Representatives Sirota, Brown, and Taggart: I know all of you have sleepless nights both behind you and ahead of you. Thank you for taking on this weighty responsibility.

In the pain we're facing, I also see a chance to look beyond our budget, and find answers to the question Coloradans have been asking: How do we unrig our economy, so it works for everyone – not just the few, but the many?

The promise of America is freedom and a fair shot.

And the promise of the West goes further: it's progress.

Progress comes from new ideas, and from the determination to see them through.

We know hardworking people are struggling to stay ahead under the lingering effects of inflation and global tariffs. Now skyrocketing costs are sinking all boats.

In Colorado, it's time to continue fighting for a new economy that brings back a shot at success for everyone. No one should be able to pull up the ladder

behind them to keep other people down. That's not the Colorado way. It is not how we move forward.

That's why this session we will do three things:

- lower everyday costs...
- protect our successes...
- and sustain targeted investments in our future.

When we lower costs and create good paying jobs, we can keep building an economy:

- where working people have a fair shot.
- where entrepreneurs can take a risk and start a business,
- where small businesses are equipped to hire, compete and succeed.
- where farms and ranches are passed down to the next generation, instead of being sold off in pieces.

On healthcare and housing especially, we need to cut right to the heart of what is making Coloradans' lives more expensive. That also includes working on childcare costs, the prices of everyday goods, and putting consumers first.

When Congress let health care premiums surge, Colorado Democrats stepped up to stabilize our insurance market and blunt the devastating impact of these hikes.

If Congress continues to fail to extend the enhanced premium tax credits, we'll need to look at options once again to keep health insurance prices from spiraling.

Colorado is a beautiful place to call home. We're lucky to live here. But the cost of renting or buying a home is making that dream almost impossible for working people.

This year we will work to unlock innovative financing mechanisms to build more affordable housing, make it easier for nonprofits to build homes on land they already own and continue to reduce property insurance costs.

We know that health care and housing represent the biggest squeezes on working people's budgets. That is why we keep coming back to these policy issues, with the fortitude to both make big changes and get it right.

We're not just bringing back a fair shot for working people to thrive – we will also make sure our kids have more possibilities too.

We have a lot to be proud of where our children are concerned. When I first entered the legislature in 2019, school finance was dire. Since then, we have raised the per-pupil funding for K-12 schools by 46%, brought total program funding up by \$3 billion, and eliminated the budget stabilization factor.

We didn't stop there. We secured free full-day kindergarten and launched universal pre-K. Universal preschool is not just saving thousands of families over \$6,000 each year in child care, it's giving kids a head start on school readiness and social connection at a critical stage.

Our next task is to unify education and opportunity, by bringing higher education, apprenticeships, and workforce pathways under one roof. Everyone must be equipped to start the career of their dreams.

Our kids don't just deserve a top-notch education, and the skills to confront a changing world.

We owe our kids, and our kids' kids, a liveable future by protecting Colorado's pristine environments, land, air and water.

And we owe it to rural communities and urban centers alike to invest in our renewable energy future.

We must hold our ground on all the protections we've put in place, and fight the Trump administration's attempts to claw away our 8 million acres of public lands and auction them off. Coloradans agree, and we all agreed in this very chamber last year: our public lands are not for sale.

And it's not just Coloradans who love their public lands: Katy Perry may have been our first pop star in space, but when those 11 minutes were up, she kissed the earth and she liked it.

I'm immensely proud that Western Slope Democrats and Republicans have a tradition of bipartisan collaboration, especially on water rights and land protection – one I hope we continue.

Together we can balance a clean, healthy environment with the needs of a growing state.

This session we're going to protect our progress.

But we will not forget about the other crucial part of the American promise: our freedoms.

Coloradans' civil rights are not to be played with. We won't shove our immigrant and LGBTQ neighbors back into the shadows. We won't give up on disability access or voting rights. We are a model for abortion rights in the post-Dobbs reality, and we won't roll them back.

We are a nation founded by immigrants and social outcasts. Diversity does make our state stronger, and it is un-American for the federal government to use masked vigilantes to arrest, detain, and evict people off the street on the basis of their skin color, language, gender, or very identity. Colorado will continue to stand against this betrayal of our values.

We will remember Renee Good...and the wrongful detentions of Jeanette Vizguerra-Ramirez, Fernando Jaramillo-Solano and his children, and just so many others.

Members: we have a lot ahead of us. Our budget situation especially will force us to concentrate on what truly allows Coloradans to thrive.

The path forward is not always clear. But in Colorado we know how to trailblaze right through the brush.

Our work for the year is just beginning. But as this is my final opening day speech...

Thank God, says my husband.

...I have to reflect for a moment on how far we have come.

I am immensely proud of what we have accomplished in the seven years I have been a part of this body.

I am so proud of the results we have delivered often in partnership with Republicans:

- Poverty is down. Incomes are up. Tax rates are lower.
- School meals for free for every student.

- Protections now abound for public health and air quality in oil and gas operations.
- More people have health coverage thanks to reinsurance, the Colorado Option, and OmniSalud.
- We strengthened protections for renters, and passed breakthrough measures to build more housing.
- We've led on pragmatic gun violence prevention.
- We passed first-in-the-nation protections for our waterways, streams, and wetlands.
- AND: One year from now, the curtains will rise on the Sundance Film Festival in Boulder.

Just like the Avalanche, and the Nuggets, and the Broncos, and someday soon, our women's soccer and hopefully, women's hockey - the big green machine has been a winning team.

To our new faces today: Reps. Slaugh, Flanell, Goldstein, and Nguyen, welcome to the Thunderdome – I mean, the Gold Dome.

Minority Leader Caldwell: Thank you for stepping up to lead your caucus. I look forward to growing our partnership this session.

To my colleagues in their final year: Majority Leader Duran, Representatives Froelich, Sirota, Soper, Titone, Valdez, and Woodrow, thank you for your service. It's been real, it's been fun...alright yeah, it's been real fun at times.

On a more personal note, it is the privilege of my life to be your Speaker. Thank you for your trust. I'm proud we have done the daily, nitty-gritty work to compromise and find solutions together.

Majority Leader Duran: I am eternally grateful to have you in my corner. You are a legislator's legislator and a fearless advocate. We have traveled far together, and I know we're not done yet. The Senate doesn't know what it's got coming. Thank you Monica, for everything.

To my dear, wonderful family: just one more session. And I really mean it this time.

You have been my collective rock through this incredible ride. Thank you for just being here and walking up the hill with me. And Susan, you are the

bravest, toughest person I know - stay strong! "Thank you" isn't enough – but thank you all.

Folks, we have big things to do this session. As we start each of the remaining 119 days in this building, I will keep some things in mind, and I hope you will too.

Talk to each other, kindly whenever you can.

Lead with laughter. Lead with compassion. Assume the best of each other, and in each other.

Each of you can find common ground with the other people who sit in these chairs, no matter how strange walking that acreage together might turn out to be.

Members...staff...and guests.

We are present.

We are organized.

We are ready to take care of business.

Welcome to the opening day of the Second Regular Session of the 75th General Assembly.