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By JAMES W. WADE III

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Cuyahoga County Executive Ed FitzGerald, in his first State of the County address, pledged a new, high standard of professional conduct for county employees and said his administration will focus on spurring business and job growth.

To a sold out crowd of 600 at the downtown Cleveland Marriott Hotel, FitzGerald described the economic development strategy his administration is developing as a plan to rescue this county from the economic stagnation the county has found itself in.

He shared that he will use a percentage of the county's share of the sales tax to back a bond issue, part of the proceeds of which would be used to create an economic development fund. The bond issue also would fund a scholarship program and support early childhood

development and community policing efforts.

The economic development portion would create incentives that could be used by the county and by its municipalities to attract new businesses or to expand existing ones. FitzGerald said he had intended to fund this vision from the savings being squeezed out of a reorganization of county government and the anticipated revenue from casino receipts. But FitzGerald said today that he didn't want to wait for those funds to come in, so he opted for the bond issue.

He described the economic development fund as unprecedented for an Ohio county. He said it would target a few key sectors, including biomedical and advanced manufacturing industries, renewable energy and the local food industry.

FitzGerald also described efforts to restore the credibility of government. He noted that he created an office of inspector general to investigate any charges of improper conduct by county employees, and said all county employees will undergo training on the newly adopted county ethics code.

FitzGerald addressed the changes he has made in his first three months in office; stressing that all contracts will be posted online and that county employees will be evaluated and trained in ethics. He also encouraged Cuyahoga's 59 communities to collaborate and business leaders to share innovative ideas.

FitzGerald's initiatives will mean cuts to existing county programs and layoffs for hundreds of county employees.

“We will not reduce the chronic unemployment of this region by adding to a public payroll, but by ensuring that more residents earn a living wage on a private payroll,” he said.

He has already cut the county payroll by about $5 million. He plans to squeeze more money from the county's computer systems and employee health care benefits, as well as evaluating what to do with the 50 buildings the county owns or leases.

FitzGerald's solution is to divert about $7 million in sales taxes to education and to solicit matching donations from businesses and foundations. The money would be split to expand the county's Universal Pre-Kindergarten program and fulfill a charter mandate to establish a college scholarship fund for county residents.

About $1 million in taxes would pay for a Safe Neighborhood Task Force of deputies deployed to help local police forces.

And about $8 million annually would pay off the $100 million the county would borrow for economic development. The economic development fund would invest in local businesses and carry out a five-year strategy the county's Economic Development Commission is crafting.

“We have one of those once-in-a-lifetime opportunities to define who we really are,” FitzGerald said of his plans and all campaign promises. “It would be easier to try to change course gradually, over a decade or so. But we're out of time.”

FitzGerald said his administration is committed to working with Cleveland to find ways to cooperate. He also wants to increase the sharing of public services across the county.

Many in the room applauded as FitzGerald asked the ballroom of business executives, lawyers and non-profit employees for real estate suggestions, as well as for volunteers to replicate a government transition process, during which more than 1,000 county residents made recommendations to increase efficiency.

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