

Speech hits key notes for area lawmakers

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SPRINGFIELD - The majority of Illinois' congressional members rallied behind President Bush's plans Tuesday to continue the war on terrorism and revive the nation's economy.

In his first State of the Union address, Bush laid out plans to shore up the military's readiness, boost homeland defense, and pull the nation from an economic slump.

"I would need some pretty strong evidence to second guess Secretary (Donald) Rumsfeld and President Bush in what they want in the budget," said U.S. Rep. Henry Hyde, a Wood Dale Republican. "I think the state of the union is strong. I think the people are united. I think they have confidence in their leader. I think we have some issues to resolve in the field of economics."

With the Sept. 11 terrorist attack in mind, the president's proposal to increase military spending to its highest level in almost 20 years is seen as a high priority by Republican leadership in Congress.

"I think the state of the union is pretty good, considering we are fighting a war," said House Speaker Dennis Hastert, a Yorkville Republican. "What we are looking at is trying to see what our needs are right now."

"Quite frankly, we have neglected this for some years, and we have to address this. We need to upgrade and it's going to cost money to do this."

U.S. Rep. Philip Crane, a Wauconda Republican, also expressed support for Bush's agenda. Rep. Donald Manzullo, an Egan Republican, and Sen. Peter Fitzgerald, an Inverness Republican, could not be reached for comment.

Some Democrats question just how that money would be spent, opposing high dollar items such as a national missile defense system in favor of spending on veterans benefits and troop salaries.

"The defense budget cannot be off the table. We need to have an entire strategic review of what it is the United States really needs to have," said U.S. Rep. Jan Schakowsky, an Evanston Democrat. "We should be investing in our troops and making sure they get the pay increases they need. ... I don't favor a national missile defense system. I think it won't make the nation safer."

But the congressmen welcome Bush's proposal to spend billions to protect nuclear power plants and skyscrapers such as the Sears Tower.

"I believe the best defense is a good offense," said U.S. Rep. Mark Kirk, a Highland Park Republican. "Illinois rates high on the homeland defense priority defense list because we have the tallest building in the U.S. and we are home to the most nuclear reactors in the U.S."

As far as fighting the recession, Hastert urged the Senate to get going on passing the president's economic stimulus package, which has passed the House but remains stalled in the Senate.

Sen. Dick Durbin, a Springfield Democrat, said that's likely to happen, but urged caution.

"It's important that we remember at this time we are dealing with a deficit and that every dollar of that deficit comes out of the Social Security trust fund. We have to be extremely careful," Durbin said.

Bush received good marks overall from some suburban congressmen, though some urged him to take some key domestic issues more seriously.

"We are the strongest nation in the world and we will come through this with the policies that have been proposed. ... It has not been easy times, but thank God for the leadership," said U.S. Rep. Judy Biggert, a Hinsdale Republican. "It's clear that we have a president and a leader that American people really trust. He has really brought the country together."

But Schakowsky called for more than just saber rattling by the president, hoping Bush works with Congress on domestic issues such as prescription drugs, healthcare and Social Security, and moves beyond promises he made in the speech.

"It has to go beyond a speech, beyond rhetoric, and he needs to deliver," she said. "I think State of the Union addresses and their importance are a bit overstated. We need action."