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Gov. Cuomo Makes Two Law School Appearances

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New York Gov. Andrew M. Cuomo made two high-profile appearances at SUNY Buffalo Law School, less than a month apart, to press his point: He will make anti-corruption measures and campaign finance reforms happen “one way or another.”

During his first appearance, at a June 12 address before about 200 people in the Charles B. Sears Law Library, the first-term governor acknowledged the recent rash of scandals among state legislators and said the time is right for the reforms he has proposed in the three-part Public Trust Act.

“Any relationship is only as good as the level of trust in it, whether it’s professional or personal,” the governor said. “And when citizens lose trust in government, it hurts the functionality of the government.”

The proposal would empower district attorneys to prosecute those who show intent to bribe a public official, whether or not the bribe took place; create a new crime called “corrupting the government” that would carry a 25-year prison sentence and a lifetime ban from doing business with the state; make it a crime for any public official to fail to report bribery; and ban corrupt public officials from receiving state contracts, holding elected office, serving as a lobbyist or being a Medicaid provider.

In addition, Cuomo proposed a set of election law reforms, most notably to provide public funding for political campaigns in an attempt to reduce the influence of big-money donors on New York elections. His proposals also would require candidates to disclose contributions within 48 hours; establish lower contribution limits in campaigns for state offices; and treat limited liability corporations as corporations, not individuals, lowering the limit on their political contributions.

His overall goal, Cuomo said, is to make the state government more effective. “I believe in the capacity of government; I believe in the function of government. I want to restore public trust because I want to make government stronger.”

“All government is, is the organizing collective for society. It’s important that that institution works and that we believe in it and trust it, because if you don’t, you limit our capacity to do good things.”

In his June appearance, Cuomo put pressure on the Assembly and State Senate to enact these reforms swiftly. But after state lawmakers adjourned their session without acting on the governor’s proposals, Cuomo returned to the Law School on July 2 to announce Plan B: invoking the state’s Moreland Act and convening a special commission to address what he called “deficiencies in the law.”

In his second SUNY Buffalo Law appearance, Cuomo announced that he had formed such a commission, saying it may even prove superior to the laws that legislators had rejected. The commission, which has already begun its work, includes Erie County District Attorney Frank A. Sedita III, a 1986 graduate of SUNY Buffalo Law School, and Law School Dean Makau W. Mutua, whom the governor described as “courageous.”

“They haven’t designed a perfect human being yet, and you will have politicians doing bad things,” Cuomo told reporters following his address before about 75 invited guests in the law library. “The question is, do you have a system in place that, when someone does the wrong thing, they get caught and prosecuted? Do you have a system in place that is designing a better way to remove the loopholes, etc., so that it is harder for people to do the wrong thing? That’s what I want addressed.”

Cuomo called the 25-member Commission to Investigate Public Corruption “the ‘best and the brightest ... the all-star team’ and said it would look into ‘systemic corruption and the appearance of such corruption in state government, political campaigns and elections in New York State.’

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