Johnson brings new energy to SUNY’s challenges

BY KESHIA CLUKEY | 12/18/2017 05:01 AM EST

ALBANY — On an unusually warm autumn day, new SUNY Chancellor Kristina Johnson took a tour of the system’s campus in Plattsburgh, in the the heart of the North Country.

Most students had better fitness facilities at their home high schools, a university official told Johnson as they walked by the college’s aging athletic center, which was built in the early 1960s.

It’s not the last time she’ll hear about outdated buildings as she tours SUNY’s 64 campuses. Nearly half of the system’s academic facilities were built between 1965 and 1975.

Aging infrastructure is just one of many challenges facing Johnson as she navigates her first year leading the largest comprehensive state university system in the nation.

The system, like others around the country, has faced declines in direct operating aid from the state and increased costs. Some upstate schools, including Plattsburgh, also are seeing declines in enrollment due to shrinking populations upstate.

Johnson has the added pressure of implementing Gov. Andrew Cuomo’s Excelsior scholarship program, which offers free tuition for eligible students from families below a certain income threshold.

And faculty, too, are aging — approximately 40 percent of faculty members are of retirement age.
With four months under her belt, Johnson, an engineer, entrepreneur, inventor and former official with the U.S. Department of Energy, is proposing the use of 21st century innovation to help solve SUNY’s fiscal and infrastructure problems.

Johnson’s 2018 budget recommendations included funds to increase the number of full-time teaching staff and approximately $800 million in capital costs to address critical maintenance issues, using energy-efficient materials and strategies while replacing outdated infrastructure.

SUNY’s large ask — which includes an approximately $232.6 million increase in operating aid — is bold given a looming state deficit and federal uncertainty, but worth the investment, Johnson said.

The benefits of making campuses more energy efficient are three fold, she told POLITICO.

The lion’s share of SUNY’s energy use is attributed to its approximately 2,800 buildings — 2,346 of which are state-operated, including academic buildings, hospitals and residence halls. Upgrades could include weatherizing buildings, using more efficient heating and cooling techniques, or even adding solar panels.

This helps the bottom line, saving campuses money, reducing operating costs and giving “local budget relief, which allows them and the presidents to do more for the academic mission,” Johnson said.

“These are exactly the kind of programs that we can propose that create the kind of synergies that we need at our campuses,” she said.

Johnson’s plans also include speeding up plans to reduce SUNY’s carbon footprint.

Johnson is familiar with finding innovative ways to finance government programs when budgets are stressed. She served as undersecretary of Energy from 2009 to 2010 under the Obama administration, when the government was dealing with the impact of the Great Recession, and oversaw a $5 billion federal investment in a program designed to make homes more energy efficient.

“It may sound counter-intuitive, but to sort of stimulate the economy and to get things moving, we actually invested heavily in energy efficiencies,” Johnson said.

Brandon Hurlbut, who served as deputy chief of staff for the Energy Department while Johnson was there, said, “she’s very smart and she’s willing to be bold. She’s not shy about expressing her opinions and she was a helpful voice in the debate when we were trying to make these investments in the DOE.”

Johnson told POLITICO she recognized a similar situation with SUNY during what promises to be a very difficult budget next year.

“I think that we want to be part of the solution and not part of the problem,” she said.

Because of SUNY’s size, Johnson’s proposals would make the system a national leader in campus energy efficiency, said Fred Kowal, president of United University Professionals, the union that represents SUNY employees. “I think the combination of the chancellor’s emphasis and the governor’s interest will bode well for New York in the future in terms of green energy and renewable energy,” he said.

Cuomo, who is positioning himself for a potential 2020 presidential run, has been burnishing his national environmental credentials with plans to reduce emissions 40 percent by 2030 and get 50 percent of electricity from renewables by 2030.
Kowal also applauded Johnson’s pledge to increase the number of full-time faculty and invest in the campuses.

Johnson’s proposals and priorities set a different tone compared with her predecessor, Nancy Zimpher, an educator whose signature initiatives revolved around teacher education and bridging the gap between K-12 and higher education.

Johnson’s entrepreneurial experience — she was involved in startup companies, most recently serving as CEO of Cube Hydro Partners LLC, which develops hydroelectric generation facilities — will help her build upon some initiatives that Zimpher put in place. In her last year as chancellor, for example, Zimpher launched the SUNY Impact Foundation, bringing in private-sector investments to bring individual campus programs to scale system-wide.

Johnson’s plans for SUNY include increasing private and philanthropic partnerships and investments, and doubling research dollars flowing to the system in the next five to six years.

Johnson said she can play the role of matchmaker between SUNY and private industry because of her background. Her academic credentials include teaching at the University of Colorado-Boulder and serving as provost and senior vice president for academic affairs at Johns Hopkins University.

Johnson also continues to serve on the boards of the global sustainable energy company, AES Corporation, as well as Cisco Systems, a leader in information technology. “That just helps me kind of have a vision about where the industries are going [and] therefore where the potentials are for new startups and new jobs and existing companies that can hire our students,” Johnson said.

But her political prowess will be put to the test as she appeals to Cuomo and the state Legislature for funding to move her initiatives forward.

“She was not necessarily a political person,” Hurlbut said of her time at the Energy Department. “What we were trying to do was bring in people with technical experience.”

While Zimpher was politically savvy and was known nationally as a leader in higher education, Johnson may take a different approach.

Johnson’s strength is bringing in ideas that help maximize the economic impact of SUNY, as well as forging relationships with the private sector, said Bruce Gyory, a senior policy adviser for Manatt, Phelps & Phillips’ government and regulatory policy practice.

“She would be unwise to play politics,” he said, adding that she should focus her efforts on creating solid public policy. “But, as is the case, good solid public policy has political dividends attached to it.”

So far her aggressive approach in pursuing SUNY’s interest in the budget may serve the system well, particularly in an election year when lawmakers are more keen on increasing aid, Kowal said.

“My initial impressions are that she is skilled in understanding the vagaries of our New York State political system,” he said. “I think this year will tell us a lot. It’s going to be a very challenging year budget-wise of course. It’s an excellent testing ground.”

It’s not just Johnson’s energy proposals, but her personal energy that has those who work with her taking notice. A member of the SUNY Board of Trustees referred to Johnson as the “reincarnation of the Energizer Bunny” at a meeting last month.

“She empowers the people around her to get things done,” said Robert Clark, University of Rochester provost and senior vice president for research. “Her energy level is kind of contagious.”

Clark has known Johnson for nearly 20 years, having worked as senior associate dean when she served as dean of the Pratt School of Engineering at Duke University.

Clark described having a discussion with Johnson as they walked across the Duke campus some years ago. She stopped, picked up some litter from the ground, threw it out and they continued on their way. That simple but striking image stuck with him.

“The whole point of Kristina is she takes great pride in all the things she’s involved in. She pays great attention to detail,” he said. “There’s no task that’s too small to lack importance.”

Back in Plattsburgh, after she acquainted herself with the campus infrastructure, Johnson addressed a room filled with the school’s faculty, staff and students, all of them eager to take the measure of the system’s new leader. Soft-spoken but decisive, she didn’t pretend to have the answers to every question or issue. But when she did, she quoted from data, books and theories to support her argument.
Ultimately, though, she wasn’t there to hear herself speak. Her goal, she said, was to listen.

“I’m just like a sponge. I just want to soak everything up,” she said.