Johnson focuses on energy in inaugural State of the University System address

By KESHA CLUKY | 01/22/2018 02:22 PM EST

ALBANY — SUNY Chancellor Kristina Johnson stayed true to her energy background in her inaugural State of the University System on Monday, proposing several plans for sustainability, including a partnership with the New York State Energy Research and Development Authority.

“I want to ask every part of the SUNY system to focus on four themes that will position SUNY as a national leader in higher education,” said Johnson, an engineer, entrepreneur, inventor and former official with the U.S. Department of Energy. Those four themes, she said, are “innovation and entrepreneurship, individualized education, sustainability and partnerships.”

Johnson announced plans to source 100 percent of the state university system’s electricity from zero-net carbon sources “as soon as possible.”

The system is on its way to meeting a 30 percent reduction in greenhouse gases by 2020, with plans to reach 40 percent by 2030, in line with state goals. But, Johnson said, “Why wait until 2030?”

“Last year, SUNY spent $189 million on energy,” she said. “We will use SUNY’s buying power to buy clean power. And the sooner we do this, the better, because we estimate it will reduce our carbon footprint by 400,000 tons of carbon dioxide equivalents per year.”

Speaking to the media following the speech, Johnson said she hasn’t put a specific timeline on the process.

Johnson announced that SUNY will partner with NYSERDA to help create a sustainability plan for each campus. The authority also will help co-fund an energy manager at the campuses in order to carry out that work. Funding details were not yet available, she told reporters after the speech.

In helping to accomplish the reduction, Johnson said all new campus buildings will be designed to achieve zero net carbon emissions. As included in her budget proposal, Johnson further described plans to invest in energy retrofits and use energy-efficient materials while addressing critical maintenance issues. SUNY’s
capital budget request includes $800 million to address these issues.

Johnson also described plans to focus on energy storage, eventually planning to use regional campuses as microgrids. Local microgrids increase the resiliency of the electricity system in areas where they are located by utilizing on-site generation, storage and other tools.

Gov. Andrew Cuomo, whom she touted in her speech as a key national energy ally, has pushed microgrids as a key part of his transformation of the energy system.

“When the power is out, we plan to have SUNY campuses have power — the power to help our communities rapidly recover,” Johnson said.

Sourcing clean electricity will pay for itself, she said. “Energy is a commodity, and we’re at the low end of that commodity cycle. Now is the time to lock in rates,” she said. “I think we’re going to start seeing some more weather volatility; we haven’t had a lot of weather volatility, so prices have been pretty subdued, interest rates are low, now is the time to act.”

The system is also planning to expand its current partnerships with National Grid, she said.

On top of the energy proposals, Johnson also announced a plan to build on the work of her predecessor, Nancy Zimpher, with the SUNY Impact Foundation. Zimpher launched the fund in her last State of the University address. It seeks private-sector investments to bring individual campus programs to scale system-wide.

Johnson plans to use the fund as a vehicle to create a system-wide endowment, supported by foundations, individual donors and companies.

“My hope would be that as we raise system endowment, that what we would then do is create a matching program. ... Let’s say with an endowed professorship, half would come from the system and half would come from the campus,” she told reporters. “So it would be able to give a real boost to the individual campaigns of all the individual campuses in the system.”

The system will also partner with Empire State Development and four venture capital funds selected to administer the “Innovation Technology Commercialization Investment Fund,” an $8 million pool of capital to invest in high-growth-potential, pre-seed stage firms. The partnership will increase the number of SUNY-affiliated companies considered for investment.

Johnson challenged the campuses to double their efforts in increasing cross-disciplinary research, scholarly work, entrepreneurship and outreach over the next decade.

She also called for the expansion of student emergency aid programming, which currently is being piloted at seven campuses, to all campuses. The program is focused on addressing family emergencies and unexpected financial hardships.

Referring to a proposal from Cuomo’s State of the State address that called on all campuses to create a food pantry to address food insecurity, Johnson said the system would create a task force to make that proposal a reality.

“An individual education is not just about helping our students chart a course through our classrooms,” she said. “It is about helping students with different backgrounds and different resources succeed. ... Tuition alone is not enough to help all of our students stay in school and finish their degrees. Other financial concerns, academic barriers, and the general unpredictability of life are challenges we need to be prepared to help our students overcome.”

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