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‘Stay weird, Utah,’ Cox says in State of the State address

Gov. Spencer Cox told state lawmakers to embrace what makes Utah different to navigate difficult issues

By [Brigham Tomco](#)

Jan 18, 2024, 8:42pm MST



Gov. Spencer Cox delivers his 2024 State of the State address to the legislature at the Capitol in Salt Lake City on Thursday, Jan. 18, 2024.

Marielle Scott, Deseret News

Gov. Spencer Cox told Utahns and their representatives that for Utah to remain the best place to live in the country they must follow this one admonition: “stay weird.”

The Beehive State’s first-term governor — who is up for reelection this year — outlined why he thinks his native land is so strange during an annual State of the State address and explained why these differences make Utah an example of how to solve problems and build community for the entire nation.

“(T)he State of the State has never, ever been stronger,” Cox said at the end of his 20-minute speech. “And I’m convinced with every passing day that the source of our state’s strength is what for the longest time people told us was our weakness. We’re different. We’re weird. The good kind of weird. The kind of weird the rest of the nation is desperate for right now. And I’m praying we can keep it that way.”

Cox delivered his message to a combined Utah Legislature gathered on the House floor of the state Capitol Thursday night. House and Senate lawmakers, fresh from the third day of the 2024 legislative session, were given T-shirts imprinted with the phrase “Stay weird, Utah” upon entering the room.

In addition to reviewing past legislative wins and recent accolades awarded to the state, Cox described his vision for maintaining Utah’s growth even while improving quality of life from the Wasatch Front to the rural red rock and for generations to come.

“The American dream is alive in Utah, but it will be dead soon if we don’t get this right,” Cox said. “Utah must lead the nation with bold and innovative solutions.”



Gov. Spencer Cox arrives to the House chamber for his 2024 State of the State address at the Utah Capitol in Salt Lake City on Thursday, Jan. 18, 2024.
Trent Nelson

What are Cox's legislative priorities in 2024?

First and foremost on his list of priorities, Cox said, is affordable housing. The governor's budget recommendations, released in December for fiscal year 2025, revolve around the Utah First Homes program, aimed at incentivizing the construction of [35,000 starter homes](#) by 2028.

Cox's proposals would allocate \$300 million to subsidize the purchase of starter homes and catalyze the development of new infrastructure.

"I believe the single largest threat to our future prosperity is the price of housing. Period," Cox said. "No one has figured this out yet, and I truly believe that we can."

Cox also honed in on the question of [homelessness](#), which has especially affected Salt Lake City. In a theme repeated throughout his remarks, Cox said Utah would

continue to demonstrate how to avoid “zero-sum thinking” by avoiding “false choices” between “compassion and accountability” and other binary outcomes.

“Unsanctioned camping must end,” Cox said. “We will provide help and services for those in need, real consequences and jail for those who willingly break the law, and civil commitment when absolutely necessary.”

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The governor’s office and Legislature achieved positive-sum outcomes during each of the legislative sessions under his tenure, Cox said, pointing to historic tax cuts and record increases in teacher pay, freezing college tuition and making school choice accessible to all Utahns, as well as efforts to preserve water and regulate how social media companies treat minors.

“But sometimes politics is binary,” Cox said, referring to bills dealing with transgender treatments for minors.

“(But) even when we disagree, and disagree passionately,” Cox said, “we must still love.”

In their response to Cox’s speech, Senate Minority Leader Luz Escamilla, D-Salt Lake City, and House Minority Leader Angela Romero, D-Salt Lake City, outlined the Democratic positions on hot-button issues and emphasized many of the same topics as Cox, including housing, homelessness and education, without leveling any direct criticisms at the governor.

“The Utah House and Senate Democratic caucuses are committed to building a stronger, more united Utah that embraces the uniqueness of its communities,” Romero said, with Escamilla concluding, “Together we have the power to shape Utah into a state that supports every member of its diverse population.”

As chair of the National Governors Association, Cox has championed the slogan [“Disagree Better”](#) — something Cox said he hopes to do with lawmakers

this legislative session, which has already touched on difficult issues like [diversity, equity and inclusion](#) initiatives in public institutions.

Mentioning a [recent interview with the Deseret News](#), Cox said Utah's rapid growth can be a "win-win." Cox highlighted that Utah enjoys one of the nation's [top economies](#) and leads on metrics of [social capital and upward mobility](#), [marriage](#) and [happiness](#). All these factors, and more, are part of what make Utah the [best state in the country](#), Cox said, and are why the state will continue to grow.

The key to achieving this outcome, he said, will be embracing the characteristics that have long set the state apart from the rest of the country.

"I think we need to amplify and preserve this type of weirdness as if our state's future depends on it. I am convinced it does," Cox concluded. "So, stay weird, Utah."

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