

Planning and Priorities are Critical to Good Capital Outlay Process

By Senator Pete Campos

The question of how best to prioritize and pay for the billions of dollars worth of needed infrastructure improvements in New Mexico is once again in the spotlight. I'm confident that the legislature and the governor will agree upon a plan before the 2005 legislative session adjourns that properly addresses our most critical statewide and local needs.

I have long advocated reforming the state's capital outlay process. Creation of a capital outlay council — something I'm advocating again in the form of Senate Bill 9 — would put the task of evaluating, prioritizing and managing capital projects into the hands of objective experts. The legislature and the governor would retain their roles by approving the projects recommended to them by a capital outlay council.

This would result in a more efficient system that ensures state taxpayers' dollars are put to the best use.

It is critical that the state prioritize its capital needs. It is estimated that New Mexico has more than \$20 billion in infrastructure needs, from water and transportation projects to economic growth initiatives. State agency buildings need repair. State facilities, including hospitals, colleges and universities and correctional facilities, need to be maintained. This year, the state only has about \$400 million — or about two percent of the total needed — to meet those infrastructure needs. Clearly, we will not successfully meet those needs if we do not prioritize them.

And we will not meet those needs if we do not change the way in which we allocate funds for capital outlay projects. Processes and methods of conducting our affairs, whether in business, government or politics, do not stay the same — they change — and we in the legislature must be part of that change.

The legislature and the governor can ensure that capital outlay funds truly benefit the people of New Mexico and make a positive impact on the lives of our constituents. We can do that by working together to prioritize projects for health care, public safety, education and transportation needs.

We must fully fund the geriatric center at the Las Vegas Medical Center, the student

center at New Mexico Highlands University and the auditorium at Luna Community College. I'm hopeful that a majority of the legislature and the governor will agree that these projects are priorities.

We also need to give strong consideration to further developing, in conjunction with private partners, the New Mexico Highlands University golf course.

I'm pleased that the governor's capital outlay plan recognizes important infrastructure needs for New Mexico, including the needs of our rural districts.

His plan acknowledges the need to fund the Las Vegas Medical Center Meadows; buy furniture and equipment for the district courthouse; make various improvements at Luna Community College and New Mexico Highlands University; fund the Rio Gallinas surface water measurement project; fund the Las Vegas regional water, waste treatment and collection project; buy a new fire engine for the Las Vegas fire department; renovate and expand the San Miguel County courthouse; support the fine arts, Trail of Tears and wastewater projects in Moriarty; complete the fish hatchery in Santa Rosa; and fund the forensics project at the Las Vegas Medical Center.

The governor and the legislature will also support more than \$100 million for public school capital outlay, to help ensure that our children study in the safest, best environments possible.

We have made steady progress in our efforts to reform the capital outlay system and ensure that critical statewide and local infrastructure needs are met. I'm confident that we will make more strides toward that goal this legislative session.