

## **Legislative Session Brings Unprecedented Opportunities, Responsibilities**

### **By Senator Pete Campos**

The 2006 legislative session is one of unprecedented opportunity for the people of New Mexico and with that opportunity comes grave responsibilities.

The state treasury is flush with cash from a strong economy and a booming oil and gas industry. State revenue in the fiscal year that begins July 1 is expected to be over \$500 million more than what was appropriated for the current fiscal year. In addition, we will have about \$1 billion available for one-time capital outlay projects, more than three times the amount of money that was available for capital projects last legislative session.

Strong state revenue is good news, as the state will be able to address important education, health care and public safety needs. We must be cautious, however, to not commit state resources to ongoing and growing programs that will continue to require infusions of state funds, since it is quite likely that New Mexico's strong revenue growth will level off in the coming years. Long-term fiscal responsibility is imperative. We must be willing and able to sustain tomorrow the programs we begin today.

Against that background, the New Mexico legislature will continue to focus on critical improvements to our public schools, health care programs and public safety issues.

We must increase the compensation paid to our schools' non-certified personnel. With the rising cost of goods and services, the salaries and wages paid to these very important school employees must be increased. Cafeteria workers, maintenance workers, secretaries, security officers and other non-certified school employees are often the backbone of a school and deserve to be compensated accordingly.

Pay increases for public safety personnel, including New Mexico's state police officers, will also be a top priority for the legislature. For too long we have lost good law enforcement officers to higher paying jobs and we must act now to reverse that trend.

Ensuring that every New Mexican has access to good, affordable health care is critical to our future prosperity. Far too many New Mexicans — one out of every five —

do not have health care insurance. New Mexicans living in rural areas do not have timely access to emergency health care. Moreover, a shortage of nurses is compounding both problems across the state.

The legislature will use the opportunity we have in 2006 to continue to expand health care coverage and services to more New Mexicans while also working to hold down the rapidly escalating costs of health care.

The state's extraordinary ability to pay for capital outlay requests this year presents as many challenges as it does opportunities. We must strive to fully fund infrastructure projects so that work on these important road, water, public facility and community projects can begin. Fully funding capital outlay projects means jobs today and much-needed facilities tomorrow.

We are fortunate that we have an ability to properly fund infrastructure, improve our public schools and work toward improving the quality of life of all New Mexicans. We must not squander this opportunity.

New Mexico is headed in the right direction. The hard and thoughtful work of the legislature and the governor over the last several years is beginning to pay off. Children are being educated earlier and their test scores are showing signs of improvement. Healthier lifestyles are being promoted, environmental protections are being put in place and our economy is gaining strength.

We have an outstanding opportunity during this legislative session to continue this progress.