

**New Mexico Has Golden Opportunity to Improve Infrastructure and Process
by Senator Pete Campos**

The legislature and the governor have a perfect opportunity this year to make huge strides toward improving our roads, water systems, public buildings and other infrastructure, as well as the way in which such projects are funded.

Our strong economy is generating unusually high tax revenue from the oil and natural gas industries, which, combined with the legislature's prudent spending policies in the past years, has produced an unprecedented opportunity to pay for much-needed projects and save money for leaner years. The legislature and the governor must work hard to make the most of this opportunity.

We should establish a process to determine the significant capital needs of our higher education institutions and work through the New Mexico Finance Authority's ranking process as we review water projects. The legislature should closely review local government projects that are on hold in order to ensure the projects are fully funded, that community priorities have not changed and the labor force is plentiful enough to complete the work.

Hundreds of millions of dollars that have been authorized for capital projects are not yet spent because the projects are not ready to proceed. All I and other legislators really want is to have the infrastructure in place so that communities and their residents will be afforded the best opportunities possible.

We should start by looking closely at the projects contained in the infrastructure capital improvement plan, a compilation of local projects. These projects are vetted by local officials and are deemed to be critically important to the various communities around New Mexico. As legislators, we should also look closely at the infrastructure priorities of our colleges and universities.

Critical water projects necessary to tap unused aquifers and move that precious resource to areas of the state deserve the attention—and support—of the legislature and governor.

Capital building resources are very important to all communities. It is important to

leverage resources, set the mechanism in place to preserve the revenue stream as a resource for a five-year plan and commit the resources necessary to properly manage the projects.

Finally, the legislature should seriously consider creating a more formal capital outlay review process. I have long advocated creating a capital outlay council to review project requests for timeliness, worthiness and completeness. Until such a system is in place, far too much money will be wasted on infrastructure projects that can be started, but not finished, with the amount of money appropriated, or on projects that are not appropriate to receive state funding.

A good model is the public school capital outlay process. Under this process, schools receive the improvements they need to provide safe and healthy learning environments. Those improvements are approved by following an objective process in which projects are properly evaluated, funded in a timely fashion and monitored during the construction phase.

We still need to address areas of the state in which new schools should be built. This is a costly proposition, but it is one that is critically necessary as our state's population grows and shifts. At the same time, we must work to maintain equitable funding for other schools around New Mexico.

We have an outstanding quality of life in New Mexico and we can preserve that through the effective use of public funds, planning for our state's coming population shifts while still preserving rural New Mexico and our beautiful environment.