

February 22, 2007

First Things First

The New Mexico Legislature has a lot of money to work with this year – both in funding for one-time projects like traffic lights and in funding for ongoing costs like the officers who enforce traffic laws. It's tempting to splurge a little with the surplus. But most years, we don't have enough, and, given that the surplus is being fed by strength in the unpredictable oil and gas industries, we might not have enough again next year. So, before we invest in new tax cuts for businesses or another state monument, we must make sure we have taken care of our citizens' most basic needs: health care and education. When we provide all New Mexicans with access to adequate health care and quality education, everything else – a strong economy, a clean environment, safe streets, quality of life – falls into place.

Although the spending plan for the budget year that starts June 30, 2007, is still being developed, most of the proposals so far suggest state spending will increase some 10 percent or 11 percent over the current year. That sounds like a big jump in spending but much of the increase is being driven by factors outside the state's control. We have to make up for the tens of millions of dollars in federal funding that have been cut by Congress and come up with ongoing sources of money for programs that have been funded year-to-year with one-time money. We also have ongoing obligations to the public school reforms and other programs still being phased in – like pre-kindergarten and home- and community-based care for the disabled and elderly. And we have to make sure agencies have enough resources to provide existing core services. Over the summer, the Legislative Finance Committee heard over and over again from state agencies that said they were short on staff.

Once those issues are addressed, the pool of “new money” available for government services is much smaller. The spending proposal now being discussed in the Legislature includes millions of dollars in expansions for home energy assistance and legal assistance for the poor, increased reimbursement rates for Medicaid providers to improve the poor's

access to health care, expansion of Medicaid to more low-income adults, and expansion of an early childhood program for the poor.

Polls show that most New Mexicans agree that health care and education must come first. The people understand that we cannot grow economically if our children do not have the opportunity to grow up healthy and learn in a safe environment. We need the people – from the local school custodian to the leaders of our biggest businesses to help us find solutions to New Mexico’s pressing problems. In turn, your lawmakers must provide bold leadership with practical solutions. Please help us lead our state into the future.

Senator Campos, D-Las Vegas, has served as the senator from District 8 in northern New Mexico since 1991 and has been a member of the Senate Finance Committee since 1997. Campos, superintendent of the Las Vegas City Schools since 2004, is also a member of the Legislative Finance Committee, Information Technology Oversight Committee, Legislative Ethics Committee, Legislative Council, and Finance Authority Oversight Committee.