

New Mexico's Future Will Be Led by the Business Community By Senator Pete Campos

New Mexico's economy is struggling to free itself from the grip of the Great Recession. Despite some signs of hope, it's clear we have a long way to go with the number of jobs in the state at 2004 levels and wages generally stagnant.

Fortunately, there are several specific steps we can take — right now — that will have both immediate and long-term impacts.

It won't be easy, and a real solution will require thoughtful input from, and difficult compromises by, everyone. But I know from my days working in my family's restaurant business, where we worked seven days a week, opening at 5:00 a.m. and closing at 9:00 p.m., that hard work toward a common purpose ultimately pays off.

As an educator, I'm keenly aware of the crucial, long-term role that a good school system plays in economic development. In fact, while all social and economic issues are linked, I believe the education of our children is at the center of all of these issues.

We have not done enough to ensure that our children are prepared to be productive workers, successful business owners and engaged civic leaders. Our high school dropout, teen pregnancy, poverty and crime rates are all too high, while student test scores, worker wages and salaries and New Mexico's number of available jobs are all too low.

That's why it is so important that we devote the time, energy, resources and money necessary to improve early childhood health and education. Doing so now will save us time, energy, resources and money later in health care, prison and public assistance costs.

We can also take action that will have more immediate results. Statewide, regional and local strategic and water plans must be taken off the shelves and updated to reflect our current strengths and challenges. A cookie-cutter approach won't work because New Mexico's diversity (which is one of our greatest strengths) means each community is unique. We should celebrate and exploit those differences, building our state and local economies around agriculture, technology, recreation, tourism, energy development and the secondary and tertiary businesses that follow.

Local downtown revitalization efforts must receive state support, both in terms of funding and planning expertise. From Grants, Gallup and Farmington to Hobbs, Las Cruces and Silver City, our downtowns must be the economic and cultural hearts of our communities. Local governments must lead the way in revitalization efforts, but the state can and should play a role, lending financial support and expertise at every step.

I welcome everyone's ideas about how to get New Mexico's economy moving again, and I'm confident we'll be successful if we get enough ideas on the table. Here are some ideas:

- * Overhaul New Mexico's tax code to simplify it and make our tax policies more attractive to investors, manufacturers, small business owners and global providers of goods and services. Relatively high tax rates on businesses in New Mexico drive away jobs, cut capital available for investment and, ultimately, cost the state revenue due to depressed economic activity.

- * Fully support the initial investments we've already made in New Mexico by extending basic and common liability protection to suppliers at the Spaceport in southern New Mexico, approving a new racetrack in northeastern New Mexico, expanding the New Mexico Rail Runner's service, reforming our tax laws to help companies like INTEL create jobs and

developing a public/private fish hatchery, rearing station, production and distribution center in central New Mexico.

- * Invest in job training programs at our community colleges and link those programs to the specific needs of New Mexico employers by supporting close working relationships between employers and educators.

- * Provide incentives to developers willing to invest in existing downtown buildings and business parks, which will lay the foundation for revitalization efforts. A blend of retail, restaurant, service, tourism and even small manufacturing outlets will help generate the foot traffic and the economic synergy necessary to stimulate our downtown economies.

- * Recognize and fully support our economic ties to the federal government. The very real threat to our economy — that the president and Congress might fail to avoid the mandatory tax increases and spending cuts from the "fiscal cliff" — should make it clear to all but the most oblivious that our ties to the federal government are strong.

- * Support a thoroughly vetted multimillion-dollar public works package that builds needed infrastructure in our communities and puts people back to work.

- * Better coordinate our federal-, state- and local-government and private services to our youth and our elderly to ensure that they get the nutrition, health care and assistance they need and deserve. New Mexicans who are especially vulnerable cannot be made victims of government inefficiency.

We must all work together during the 2013 legislative session to set aside our political differences and find solutions to the economic challenges we face. We can do it if we recognize that we all want to make New Mexico stronger.