

It's up to All of Us to Determine New Mexico's Future

By Senator Pete Campos

What we do next may very well determine the fate of our state.

Will we continue the divisive, dismissive and disingenuous rhetoric of recent months to seek political victory merely for the sake of winning? Or will we thoughtfully discuss solutions to the complex problems we face so that New Mexico might have the educated and motivated workforce that employers desire; so that millennials might stay in New Mexico or, even better, move here from elsewhere; so that the state's chronically high poverty, crime and unemployment rates might finally drop; so that tax revenue to the treasury might increase; and so that we might spend the money necessary to improve our schools, roads and bridges, public safety and health programs, and cultural amenities?

Will we create a cycle of prosperity rather than continue a cycle of poverty?

Making the right choice is easy; actually acting on it will be hard. This will be especially true after this election season, as our leaders must set aside personal feelings and move past the misstatements that marked the campaigns in favor of an honest, open discussion.

We cannot fix a long-term imbalance between state revenue and expenditures by scraping together unspent money from various accounts any better than a family living on the edge of poverty can achieve prosperity by holding a yard sale. We cannot reduce New Mexico's perpetually high crime rate by putting criminals *who have already committed crimes* in jail for longer periods of time. We cannot create jobs without social and educational systems that create good workers.

It's time for the difficult discussion we've delayed for years: how can New Mexico raise the money it needs to improve the education our children receive, both at home and in school, divert our young people from a life of crime toward a life of financial security and civic involvement, and support the economy and quality of life we desire? Properly addressing early childhood development, child abuse, drug addiction, alcohol dependency, mental illness, obesity and the needs of the elderly, our veterans and those with special needs — all of which is expensive — is paramount to making New Mexico a great place to live and work.

How does New Mexico raise more money without damaging our fragile economy and how do we spend less money without damaging our struggling education, health and safety programs? The current budget is balanced on paper, but only because the state's General Fund

balances are essentially zero, guaranteeing that it won't last more than a few more months.

New Mexico's tax system needs to be simple, consistent and progressive so that it raises the money we need to educate our children, repair our roads and bridges, keep our communities safe and ensure that our residents are healthy. We must diversify our economy, support the creation of jobs by improving our system of selecting and funding infrastructure projects and resist the temptation to earmark tax revenue.

We also cannot afford to increase spending beyond our means. We have already cut the state budget to the point that citizens will begin to notice a decrease in services, so further cuts must be extremely targeted. Middle class families are struggling to make ends meet and get the services they need.

Policymakers have taken all the easy steps already. Now it's time to make the really tough decisions.

All of us have to be involved in the conversation — from top policymakers, including the governor, to teenagers who in just a few short years will be making critical decisions about whether to remain in New Mexico or move to another state. And it has to be a *conversation*. We must leave the slogans and posturing at the door. The future of New Mexico demands nothing less.