

Legislatively Approved Budget Is Sound, Responsible

By Senator Pete Campos

The \$6.2 billion state budget approved by the Legislature is a responsible spending plan that emphasizes the need for quality education, child well-being and safety and public safety, even in the face of flat state revenue.

Declining oil prices worldwide and a struggling economic recovery in New Mexico left policymakers with less than \$100 million in new money available for the fiscal year that begins July 1 — just 1.3 percent more than the current year's spending plan. That extremely limited increase hamstrung budget writers who were seeking to provide more resources to public schools and jobs creation programs.

Even so, the members of the Senate Finance Committee and the House Appropriations and Finance Committee were able to increase public education spending by \$36.6 million; Corrections Department spending by \$10.5 million; Children, Youth and Families Department spending by \$8.3 million; Department of Public Safety spending by \$6.8 million; and tourism and economic development spending by \$3.5 million. The budget plan is a testament to the Legislature's commitment to creating jobs by approving a fiscally responsible spending plan that emphasizes public education, safety and economic development.

The Legislature approved new spending for classroom supplies, stipends for bilingual and special education teachers, and for a teacher mentorship program. Proven reading, pre-kindergarten, K-3 Plus, teacher quality and truancy and dropout programs were continued and even expanded in some cases.

The Legislature understands that a good education is the best and most enduring economic development program that the state can support. Good schools help create good students who become good workers for new and expanding businesses. It sounds simple, and it is, of course, more complicated than that, but it also is true that our future economic and social success really boils down to ensuring that our children get the best education possible.

The Legislature also recognizes that more immediate action is necessary to stimulate our economy. Our spending plan includes \$1.5 million to increase tourism advertising in an effort to bring important out-of-state money into New Mexico, \$2 million for the Job Training

Incentive Program, \$1 million for the MainStreet Program to revitalize downtown areas across New Mexico and \$1.2 million for the Economic Development Partnership to market the state to businesses.

Another aspect of the Legislature's duty to appropriate money is found in the annual capital outlay package. This legislation helps stimulate the economy by putting construction workers and other personnel back to work and by creating the infrastructure needed to support business and to ensure a good quality of life. This year's package as approved by the Senate includes \$1 million for improvements to New Mexico Highlands University, \$800,000 for Phase 2 of the Media Education Center at Luna Community College, \$2.9 million for security upgrades at several correctional facilities, including the Springer correctional facility, \$16 million for the Meadows long-term care facility and another \$2 million for upgrades to the Behavioral Health Institute, both in Las Vegas, and \$2.3 million for projects at Miners' Colfax Medical Center in Raton. In addition, \$1.8 million is appropriated from state revenue anticipated from the new Indian gaming compacts to complete the Mora County courthouse.

While the projects in this year's capital outlay package are worthy, the Legislature still needs to work on overall reform of its project selection, funding and monitoring processes. New Mexico's haphazard manner of funding capital outlay projects cannot be sustained.

There is no reason to believe that New Mexico's economy and resulting state revenues will improve dramatically anytime soon. We all must learn to live with austere budgets for the next several years, but by maintaining prudent spending levels and by devoting money to critical areas such as public education and public safety, we can ensure that New Mexico is on solid ground for the future.