

New Mexico Needs a Thoughtful Plan for the Future. Now.

By Senator Pete Campos

The political punditry in the aftermath of the recent elections has focused on the inevitable political maneuvering while missing an essential point: citizens are tired of the bickering and rhetoric and are desperate for real solutions to real problems.

Much of the talk in the weeks since the election has focused on which legislators and members of Congress will gain or lose power or whether the governor will be able to more easily advance her agenda through the legislature. How will the president work with Congress? Has the country undergone a dramatic philosophical shift? Or is this change more of a footnote in the history books?

Of course, for close observers and pundits, those questions are interesting, and sometimes even fun, to kick around. But the truth is, the answers to those questions mean nothing to the young woman in her twenties who can't find a job that pays enough for her to live on her own, or to the seven-year-old boy starting his day hungry because he's one of 144,000 New Mexico children living in poverty, or to the hundreds upon thousands of New Mexicans struggling to find jobs, grappling with substance abuse or facing a bleak future because of an inadequate education.

The rhetoric means nothing to the shopkeeper in rural New Mexico who has seen his customers steadily leave for Albuquerque or, even worse, Colorado, Nevada, Utah or Texas, or to the 40-something professional who plans to move her family from New Mexico because she's advanced as far as she can here. The rhetoric doesn't matter to the young college student who's making the decision not to become a teacher because it just doesn't seem like it will pay enough. It doesn't matter to the elderly couple looking to retire in another state because New Mexico's reputation makes it seem like it's just not the right fit.

Posturing and politics mean nothing to those people. What is clear from the November elections is that citizens are tired of the bickering and rhetoric and are more than ready for results. It is the job of elected leaders, including myself and my colleagues in the

New Mexico Legislature, to work in a *nonpartisan* manner — not just *bipartisan* manner — to reduce poverty by improving our education system and bolstering our economy in both the Albuquerque area and rural New Mexico; to reduce crime by, again, improving our education system and economy and supporting programs for substance abuse and criminal rehabilitation; and to improve access to health care by supporting rural hospitals and clinics and providing economic and social incentives for health care providers to stay in New Mexico, especially rural New Mexico.

I want to emphasize the word *nonpartisan*, because the challenges we face are so much bigger than a two-party system. I think that, from time to time, partisan politics can paint decision-makers into a corner and force us to make choices based on what one group or another stands for, rather than objectively look at the best practices and the best path forward. If we are serious about making the kinds of changes we need to make to address some of the real problems everyday New Mexicans face, we have to be willing to look beyond partisanship, get over past disputes and petty differences and even step outside of our comfort zones.

We have clean air and vast and beautiful landscapes. We have abundant natural resources, many of them renewable ones, such as solar, wind and geothermal. We are New Mexico True. We have smart and talented people representing a variety of races, ethnicities and cultural backgrounds. We have children who are excited about life and elders who unselfishly share their experiences to make life better for their children and generations to come. But that is not enough. The optimism and enthusiasm of those willing to take risks, invest in New Mexico and try new ideas are tempered by those who preach caution, by a stale economy and by a disturbing depopulation trend.

We must break the cycle by forging a plan that is second to none and that the rest of the country can look to as a practical, common-sense and successful approach to transform New Mexico from a state of poverty to one of progress, prosperity and competitiveness. Here are some ideas that should be part of the discussion.

First, we must understand the problem. We know that New Mexico ranks low in

child well-being, that job creation lags behind our neighboring states and that families are leaving rural New Mexico for urban areas, be it Albuquerque or in another state. We have all seen the statistics showing these trends. However, statistics only tell a part of the story. Before we can begin to fix things, we must first grasp why they need fixing. We must answer some questions far more basic than the ones posed above. Why are people leaving rural areas for urban ones? How are other states creating more jobs than we are? How do we better protect and teach our children? I suspect we all have hunches about the answers, but that's not the same as having good data.

Regardless of what the answers to those questions are, education must be an element of any path forward. We need to fund education programs that are proven to prepare children and adults for jobs that already exist or will soon exist in New Mexico, that will provide new or expanding companies with the skilled labor force they need and that will provide New Mexicans with the skills they need to land those jobs. We must ensure that high school curricula are in alignment with expectations of first-year college students. More importantly, we must ensure that college programs are in alignment with the needs of potential employers. We must give our youngest learners a fair start as early as possible, and we need to remain committed through college or even graduate school.

We need to significantly expand our social safety net to eliminate food insecurity and ensure that everyone who needs health care can get it. It is embarrassing and shameful that as 2014 comes to a close, those 144,000 New Mexico children are still living in poverty.

We must closely examine our tax structure to be sure that it both adequately funds state government while still making New Mexico attractive to out-of-state businesses looking to relocate here.

It is important to note here that this is not a rural versus urban issue. While people may be moving to cities, they often face the same challenges, and need the same things, as their rural counterparts: jobs, education and health care.

Finally, we must acknowledge that there is no silver bullet for our problems. No single tax break, no education initiative and no change in the way we regulate any particular

industry or classify any particular crime is going to get us where we need to be. It will require time, it will require focus and most of all, it will require all of us working together to make important and difficult choices.

Experience has taught me that some of the toughest, yet most rewarding, undertakings are those where people work together to forge a plan, implement an initiative, *believe in it* and see it through to the end. I know all of us, as New Mexicans, are capable of such an undertaking, and I look forward to helping make it happen.

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