

Opportunity for Northeast New Mexico

By Senator Pete Campos

Northeastern New Mexico has an opportunity to define itself as a place where families thrive in safe, quiet communities, where children get personal attention in good, small schools and where everyone's contributions make a difference every day.

This superior quality of life is made possible by what many view as the area's greatest challenge: a sparse population in an already sparsely populated state. But it is the ingenuity and character of the people of northeastern New Mexico — in fact, of the people of all of rural New Mexico — that make it one of the best places to live.

No doubt there are challenges facing the residents of Colfax, Guadalupe, Harding, Mora, Quay, San Miguel and Union counties. With just 67,000 people living in an area almost as big as West Virginia, it is tough for businesses, post offices, hospitals and health clinics to stay open, for churches to attract large flocks, for schools to remain in each community and for libraries, movie theaters and restaurants to attract customers. This isn't going to change anytime soon, maybe even ever, as the population in this area has increased just nine percent in the last 30 years — well below the statewide growth rate of 58 percent over the same time.

Fortunately, the rural fiber of those who have lived all of their lives in this part of the state remains strong.

There have been opportunities for many of us to leave the area and to work and to raise our families elsewhere, but it is hard to beat the quality of life in rural New Mexico. Family roots, fond experiences and jobs keep us here and, in many cases, provide a strong incentive for former rural residents to return. We enjoy knowing our neighbors and watching our children grow up with the same friends for years. We understand and value the importance of community involvement because each of our contributions of time, energy and skill is necessary and makes a difference. We enjoy spending time with our families each evening, building or strengthening bonds that will last a lifetime.

Our ingenuity and creativity will help us overcome the issues that still confront us. We're seeking a pipeline to transport or carry water into northeastern New Mexico that will address the water issues of Las Vegas and deliver water throughout northeastern New Mexico and into central and southern New Mexico. Our secondary and post-secondary schools complement each other

and provide good preparation for our children and adult learners seeking a career change or learning new trades. We've secured the resources to complete a community center in Amalia; a senior citizens center in Wagon Mound; a top-quality long-term care and home-away-from-home facility, as well as a state police district headquarters, in Las Vegas; and a warmwater fish hatchery, rearing station and fisheries educational center in Santa Rosa.

Our small communities and small schools, and the quality of life they support, cannot be re-created once they are lost. Those of us who have chosen to remain in rural New Mexico, and those who have returned or relocated seeking a better quality of life, will band together as we always have to solve problems, support each other and teach our children what it means to be resourceful rural New Mexicans. We'll continue to work to improve our economy and give young people good reasons to stay in their communities.

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