

State's Waistline is Shrinking

By Senator Pete Campos

The heady days of relying on a booming local economy, federal funds and surplus state funds to support state government are over. We've kicked the can so hard and so far down the road that we've flattened it.

Just as every New Mexico family is delaying big purchases, skipping vacations, dining out less and even finding ways to save money on necessities like groceries and utilities, state government is cutting its spending. We're going on a diet, and like any successful diet, it will take dedication, time and a lifestyle change to see long-lasting results. I'm confident we'll succeed for the same reason most people stick with a diet: we have no choice.

State revenue has dropped sharply from its peak of \$6 billion in the fiscal year that ended June 30, 2008, and it's not expected to reach that level again for several years. We've run out of short-term fixes, and tax increases appear to be off the table, so we literally have no choice but to cut back on spending.

We also must be careful that we don't starve ourselves on our new diet. We must continue to devote adequate money to public education, health, safety and other critical programs upon which our long-term success depends. Work force training and unemployment assistance must also continue, especially during a recession, to ensure that we're doing everything possible to help our neighbors get back on their feet and find good jobs.

Crash diets aren't healthy, and our reduced spending plan must be as thoughtful, balanced and compassionate as it is inevitable.

The legislature and the governor appear very willing to work together in a bipartisan manner to cut state spending while protecting New Mexico's most vulnerable residents. All New Mexicans can take a good deal of comfort knowing that the state's top leaders are committed to cooperating to meet this difficult challenge. Restoring the public's trust in its state government — like a lifestyle change that accompanies a diet — will have profound effects because consumer confidence will rebound as civic involvement increases and cynicism decreases.

We must and can do more, however. Federal stimulus funds helped ease the fall from our once-robust state revenue and the transition to the leaner diet we now face. But that money will not flow any longer, and we must now invest wisely to maximize returns, leverage any available federal funding and scale back our collective expectations for state funding for special and local projects. We must ensure that critical projects — those that ensure safe drinking water, good roads and a viable public health infrastructure — are addressed before we deal with projects that are desirable, but which we can live without until the economy recovers, such as swimming pools and playgrounds.

This is a difficult time, and getting through it will require strong leadership, a common sense of purpose and a willingness to compromise. I'm confident that the governor and legislature will succeed for the benefit of all New Mexicans.