

The Main Thing

By Senator Pete Campos

For the past several years, as the holidays draw near and the legislative session looms just beyond them, I have written an article outlining the challenges facing New Mexico and trying to map out solutions to them. This year feels different. Perhaps it is because I recently retired from my full-time job and now have much more time to devote to my service as a state senator and because I continue to talk with and listen carefully to people from all over the state. Of course, as the years go by, the number of challenges we face as New Mexicans never really gets smaller, and some challenges remain year after year. Still, this year feels different, or perhaps there's a new way of looking at things.

I had wanted to discuss budget priorities, state services and the vital need to stimulate local economies because those are truly critical elements of our state's future. I had hoped to touch on rural health care and efficient use of taxpayer money, too. I intended to get into some depth on major issues we will likely be discussing when the legislative session convenes in January: addressing the federal REAL ID Act of 2005 regarding boarding airplanes and entering federal facilities; capital outlay reform; ethics and campaign finance reform; and DWI penalties.

As I was wrapping my mind around how best to frame these discussions, I was reading an article that mentioned basketball great Pat Riley, who advised never to lose sight of the main thing. He said, "The main thing has to be the main thing." He was right, of course. The main thing does have to be the main thing. But what is our main thing? What single thing can the legislature address that will make a difference for all New Mexicans, that will help us begin to climb away from our forty-ninth or fiftieth ranking in so many studies?

If you were to ask all 112 legislators, you will likely receive more than one response from each member. It's a 30-day session, so some will say the budget is the main thing, or that education, which accounts for almost two-thirds of that budget, is that main thing. Those are reasonable answers, but I suspect the answer may be simpler than that.

As I began to talk to people around the state, to everyday New Mexicans who are just trying to get by, I got the distinct sense that trust in government may be at an all-time low. While this isn't news to anyone who's been paying attention, I was struck by just how little folks today seem to believe in their government.

And so I think the one main thing this legislature must focus on, the thing that should drive all of our decisions this session, is hope. We must find a way to restore hope for all New Mexicans, and we must view each piece of legislation we consider through this prism: "Will it foster hope in our citizens?". We can begin in these simple ways.

First, as with any 30-day session, we must develop a responsible budget that accounts for the financial realities currently facing New Mexico while continuing to provide critical government services. As we begin to restore hope, we have to make sure that it doesn't erode further, and state government services are a big part of that. As always, education must be a centerpiece of the budget. It is important that early childhood programs, as well as public and higher education, maintain high standards and constantly improve those standards; a highly educated, highly capable workforce is perhaps the single most important component of economic growth for New Mexico.

Second, the legislature can restore hope by addressing the federal REAL ID Act of 2005 standards. There is no time for finger pointing or reviving past squabbles. Now we must all come to the table and compromise. As with any true compromise, not everyone will get everything they want, except perhaps everyday New Mexicans, who just want to be able to board airplanes and enter federal facilities, not to mention drive or even shop, as many stores require an ID when paying by credit card or check.

Another key to restoring hope is reforming our capital outlay system. This is key for two reasons. First, it helps reassure citizens that public money is being spent wisely and efficiently. I think reports of almost \$1 billion in unspent capital outlay money have justifiably undermined the perception that we, as legislators, know what we're doing. We must develop a better system for prioritizing projects and funding them adequately. An absolutely critical component of any capital outlay reform will be better project planning. The second reason capital outlay is so critical is that it injects money into local communities across the state. Small businesses in New Mexico, particularly those in rural communities, are struggling, and this offers some much-needed help.

Lastly, and perhaps most importantly, is ethics reform. Even in these modern times, when people expect their news instantly, and one scandal is forgotten only because another eclipses it relatively quickly, I can think of no factor that does longer-lasting damage to our

credibility, and to hope, than reports of public corruption. Ethics, election and campaign finance laws can be exceedingly complicated, and while we will have to remain mindful of things like due process, we simply must begin to rapidly get things in order if we really wish to restore hope.

Of course, there are other areas that need our attention, too. We have what many refer to as a broken tax system. It can be confusing and features far too many exemptions that are impossible to track. Fixing it will be no small task, but we must get started soon. Laws regarding DWI and repeat DWI offenders will have to be looked at. Public employee salaries need to be examined and increased. We need to ensure that New Mexicans are healthy, both physically and mentally. A full-fledged early childhood program must be agreed to, implemented and made available to all New Mexico families. We will also have to look into keeping our communities safe by giving New Mexico's judges discretion on setting bail to make it more difficult for some repeat offenders to get back on the streets.

I know this seems like a sizable list, and it is. But it all flows from the main thing: hope. Without it, New Mexico cannot begin to consider attracting new businesses that will help us grow. I, for one, will never give up hope that New Mexico can catapult itself to the top of the lists on which we are currently at the bottom. I know that many of my fellow legislators feel the same way. This upcoming session offers us a chance to begin to restore hope for all New Mexicans, and it is a chance we simply cannot waste. Of course, hope is just the starting point. We have real work to do, and hope alone will not get it done. It is a good place to start, though. Now is the time for our knowledge, experience and vision to be put to work.