

Ethics Reform Deserves Support

By Senator Pete Campos

New Mexicans are understandably weary of hearing tales of ethical lapses by their public officials. The New Mexico Legislature has an opportunity during this year's legislative session to strengthen our ethics laws and restore the public's faith in its democracy.

The public should not believe that government is unethical and that every elected official and bureaucrat has a hand out. Far from it, the overwhelming majority of New Mexico's elected officials and public employees work hard and are dedicated to the high ideals of public service. The public is well-served by its government in New Mexico.

Unfortunately, there are and always will be a few people who choose to act unethically. Their bad acts are doubly abusive. Not only is the immediate victim of their act harmed, but the public's faith in its democracy is shaken every time an unethical public official is exposed. The cynicism that results grows and spreads through our society and can take years to eradicate.

The New Mexico Legislature can and should respond to this problem this year. I support the following measures designed to curb corruption and restore the public's faith in its government.

First, the New Mexico Legislature should create an independent ethics commission to enforce the state's ethics laws and advise public officials, lobbyists and political candidates about their provisions. The commission and its staff should be equally devoted to educating public officials and others about the principles of ethical behavior and their requirements under our ethics laws, and to investigating potential violations and enforcing the laws. At the same time, the New Mexico Legislature itself should strengthen its ethics rules to give its existing ethics committees the tools it needs to investigate complaints about legislative misbehavior.

While ethical lapses are relatively rare, they are damaging, and a mechanism should be in place to investigate allegations and resolve them quickly.

Second, campaign contributions and gifts should be limited. It is an unfortunate perception that large campaign contributions and gifts to elected officials and candidates for office influence official decisions. While I believe this perception is overstated, the

perception is nevertheless widely held, and for that reason it should be addressed. The best option is to strengthen our laws requiring all campaign contributions and most gifts to be publicly reported by limiting the amount that can be given.

A good starting point was recommended by Governor Richardson's Task Force on Ethics Reform: limit individual campaign contributions to statewide candidates to \$2,100 and to candidates for district office to half that, \$1,050. This limit, or something reasonably similar, would ensure that no single individual, corporation, union or political action committee would be able to disproportionately influence a candidate.

Gifts should also be limited. Lobbyists and their clients should not be allowed to give elected officials or public employees expensive gifts, whether in the form of an all-expense-paid trip to the Super Bowl or a dinner at an expensive restaurant. At the same time, the limit should be reasonable enough — say \$50.00 or \$75.00 — to allow for lunches, reasonably priced dinners or relatively small gifts.

Ethical lapses and corruption slowly but steadily erode the foundation of our democracy. Elected officials and concerned citizens alike must work hard to fight corruption and the appearance of impropriety so we can restore that faith.