

Guest Editorial
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“Pork” Important to State

\$940 million. Nearly a billion dollars. That’s the amount the state has available this year for capital outlay. The state typically has less than half that amount but this has been a big year for the oil and gas industries – boosting both the severance tax permanent fund used to back capital outlay bonds and general state revenues. This is one-time money, inappropriate for ongoing state expenses like salaries or health care.

Capital projects – from traffic lights to million dollar water systems – are often scorned as “pork,” but this money is critical for New Mexico communities, both large and small. It’s an investment in our people and their future. It pays for playing fields for our children, online computer systems for paying taxes, and museums to hold our priceless heritage. It makes drinking water and our roads safe. Work on state-funded construction projects fuels the economy and the use of the facilities keeps economies alive.

New Mexico has been criticized for its capital outlay process, mostly because it has no effective process for prioritizing spending. In fact, a recent review by legislative staff found that, despite efforts over the last few years to fix the ways in which the state distributes capital outlay dollars and manages projects, the state still has no real system for putting the most important projects at the top of the list.

The review found a reluctance to revert funds from inactive projects, a prioritization process that is merely the compilation of wish lists from state and local agencies, overbroad criteria that ensure essentially any project can get approval, the use of long-term debt to pay for short-term assets, and procedures inadequate to ensure the money is spent properly.

I have introduced legislation in the past to clarify the process and intend to continue to support efforts to ensure New Mexico gets the most from its capital investment dollars. In a state like New Mexico, where resources are limited and our capital outlay budget is highly dependent on the undependable energy industry, it is important that we fix this problem. New Mexico has an estimated \$20 billion in infrastructure needs and the Legislature must develop multi-year, multi-agency capital outlay plans that prioritize needs and create the systems to adequately monitor these projects

The Legislature and the governor can ensure that capital outlay funds truly benefit the people of New Mexico and make a positive impact on the lives of our constituents. We can do that by working together to prioritize projects for health care, public safety, education and transportation needs.

Senator Campos has been a member of the Senate Finance Committee for nine years. The senator for parts of Guadalupe, Mora, San Miguel, Santa Fe and Tarrant counties, Campos is also a member of the Information Technology Oversight Committee, Legislative Ethics Committee, Legislative Council and Legislative Finance Committee.