

Autumn is a Time of Hope

By Senator Pete Campos

As a younger man, I used to view this time of year with great hope. As leaves start to fall, days get shorter and nights colder, and it's time to plan for new opportunities. As an educator, I learned to see the promise that late September holds — classrooms full of new faces beginning to grasp new lessons and concepts. As a state senator, I view this time of year through hopeful eyes — elections will soon give way to new faces and a chance to make good on the promise that we as elected officials make to the people — that their values will be reflected through our actions and that their voices will be projected through us.

This year, that hope is especially bright, as we find ourselves with multiple opportunities to come together and shape New Mexico's future in a way that hasn't been possible in a decade. New members of the legislature, a new governor and, yes, over \$1 billion in new, nonrecurring money mean that we have an opportunity to address some of our most pressing challenges in creative new ways, all with the goal of improving life for all New Mexicans. How we navigate these decisions and spend taxpayer dollars will define us, both as policymakers and as a state, for years to come.

Of course, we must season our hope with tempered caution. Charging headlong into January without discussion, agreement and careful planning could easily mean that we waste a golden opportunity.

In order to transform the hope and confidence for our future into policy, there are a number of things we can begin working on immediately:

(1) In part because of a recent court ruling, we need to ensure that every student in New Mexico is receiving a quality education. There is perhaps no greater source of hope than our children. Providing them with an education that will prepare them for college and tomorrow's workforce is a commitment from which we cannot waver. No matter how we approach the solution, a big part of it has to involve better support for our teachers. We must also be certain that our children are safe while in school. Much work has been done in the past year regarding school safety, but I believe there is still more to do.

(2) We must simplify our tax code and remove other hurdles to economic development, such as lack of access to broadband internet and to a highly skilled workforce ready to move into

tomorrow's jobs. We also need to give serious consideration to increasing the minimum wage to make it easier for those earning it to be able to support themselves and their families.

(3) We must tackle capital outlay reform. The \$1 billion in new money that has been in the news recently is nonrecurring, meaning that while it cannot be used to fund ongoing government operations, it can be used for infrastructure projects. Dumping money into a capital outlay system that does not carefully plan and prioritize is not too much different from refusing to prepare for a massive storm.

(4) We must develop a strategy to address and safeguard the long-term solvency of our public pension plans. Public employees are a vital thread in the fabric that blankets each of our communities. Educators, police officers and state workers of all stripes are our friends, neighbors and family; they deserve a retirement system that will be there for them when it is time to retire. This is especially important as we look to attract new, younger employees to state government, rather than watch as they leave New Mexico for better-paying jobs elsewhere.

(5) We have to find ways of diversifying our economy to better insulate ourselves from the boom and bust cycle of oil and gas. While it's fair to acknowledge that the current windfall we are enjoying comes from oil and gas development, it is equally fair to note that falling oil and gas prices played a large role in the financial crisis the state faced two years ago, as we were forced to cut budgets that provided important public services across state government. Development of renewable energy resources, better marketing of our tourism and outdoor recreation industries and improving ways to nurture small business development are all ideas to carefully consider and coordinate now.

(6) We have to remain mindful of confronting many of the other challenges we have been facing for years: water and natural resource management, public health issues, family well-being and crime. Each of these challenges is too important to take a back seat to the other issues outlined above.

Above all, as we near the end of this election cycle and begin to shift our gaze from campaigning to governing (two very different things), we must maintain our civility at all costs. Partisan and intra-party bickering threaten to undo whatever progress we can make toward the hope for a better life for all New Mexicans. The notion that "there is no compromise" twists the perception of government toward something other than what it really is: honest, hard-working people constantly striving toward the greater good.

We have been blessed with the chance to weave the individual fibers of our vital institutions — education, businesses, public employees and, above all, our families — into a fabric that's much stronger than the sum of its individual parts. Through careful planning, teamwork and vision, we can transform the hopes and dreams of the people we are elected to represent, whether or not they voted for us, into the kind of action that will catapult New Mexicans to new levels of hope and prosperity.

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