

**Legislature Faced Difficult Choices, Strived for Compromises**  
**By Senator Pete Campos**

This year's legislative session will long be remembered as one of the most difficult in many years, as the slow-growing economy forced legislators to cut spending for the third year in a row.

The \$5.4 billion budget approved by the legislature and sent to the governor represents our collective statement of policy priorities for the upcoming fiscal year. In many ways, it mirrors our priorities of the last several sessions: educating New Mexico's children, providing health care to those who need it but cannot afford it and protecting us all from criminals and others who would do us harm. The bad news is that the spending proposal for the fiscal year that begins July 1 is down three percent from the current year's spending plan, which itself is down four percent from last year's spending plan, which was down five percent from the previous year.

Just like virtually every New Mexican, the state continues to tighten its belt. The legislature has spent the last several years grappling with this difficult budget situation.

The good news is that we have managed our way through this financial crisis about as well as we could have hoped, delicately balancing the budget during these tough economic times. Our spending cuts have been incremental and carefully designed to do the least amount of harm to those who can least afford it. We are cognizant of our duty to look after the health, safety and overall well-being of New Mexicans. Over the last several years, we have freed up millions of dollars by cutting stalled construction projects, sweeping cash from various state accounts, requiring state employees and teachers to pay more into their retirement plans and delaying scheduled expenses. We have also wisely used federal stimulus funds to supplement critical state programs.

The result is a thoughtful, well-reasoned approach to the budget that meets the minimum needs of the state for another year while keeping our reserves at five percent of appropriations — a prudent level. As a last resort, we have had to cut state spending further for the next fiscal year, but we did so fully expecting to be able to restore spending to provide needed and basic services as the economy continues to improve. As a member of the Senate Finance Committee, I know as well as anyone the very real impacts of these cuts. Each dollar that we cut from education reduces a child's chance of succeeding. Each dollar we cut from social services makes it more difficult for less fortunate New Mexicans to get the mental and physical health care, food or housing they desperately need. Each dollar we cut from senior citizen programs diminishes the quality of life enjoyed by elderly New Mexicans. Each dollar we cut from public safety programs increases the chances that any one of us will be the victim of a crime. And I know very well that each dollar we cut from state employees' and teachers' take-home pay hurts not only each of those employees and their families, but also the grocery stores, restaurants, shops and businesses at which those employees spend their money.

For those who have been and will continue to be hurt by these spending cuts, I urge you to have faith in the process that will soon help us resume higher spending levels. We strive to be fiscally responsible, which includes investing in the education of our children and the health and safety of all New Mexicans, as well as protecting the investments we've already made in infrastructure around New Mexico.

For a variety of reasons — some practical and some that are simply a recognition of today's political reality — this is not a time to raise revenue by boosting taxes. It is a time to carefully follow each tax dollar that is raised to ensure that it is spent wisely and to reexamine the tax credits, deductions and exemptions that are granted to ensure that they continue to serve a worthy purpose or that they generate more money than they cost the state.

We will work in the interim to make state government more efficient and save even more money so those savings can be redirected into critical state programs. And we will continue to support policies that engender certainty in the budgetary process and our taxation policies so that everyone who lives and works in New Mexico can enjoy as much stability as possible.

As the economy improves, we will work to restore spending on the programs that do the most good for New Mexicans who are most in need. Until then, we can all be confident in knowing that by continuing to do our part, we'll get through these tough times.