

Legislature Taking Responsible, Prudent Path

By Senator Pete Campos

The legislature is making hard choices to cut government spending and raise the money necessary to pay for essential services. While no one is happy about the choices we are making, all of us can take some comfort in knowing that the legislature is acting responsibly.

The current economic crisis is forcing families and government alike to rethink budget priorities in the face of a staggering financial reality.

New Mexico's general fund spending has dropped more than \$1 billion since peaking at \$6 billion in 2008 — a plunge of 20 percent in just a couple of years. State agencies and educational institutions have already cut back on nonessentials, scrapped low-priority services and looked for every way possible to provide the same or even better services to the public at a lower cost. State employees' take-home pay has already been cut, and most state employees have been forced to take unpaid furlough days. Others have been laid off. Construction projects have been canceled in order to rebuild the state's cash reserves.

It is against this backdrop that the legislature is poised to approve a bare-bones budget for the upcoming fiscal year — a budget that pleases no one. A plan approved by the senate relies on broad state government spending cuts, more deductions from state employees' paychecks and modest tax increases. Together, these measures will ensure that our children continue to receive a good public education, that needier New Mexicans continue to receive the health care and nutritional assistance they need, that our streets remain free of crime and that our business climate remains favorable in this tough economy. They will help restore our cash balances, preserving our good credit rating and helping the state weather future downturns.

Our economic recovery will be slow, and it will continue to be difficult, but this plan sets a good foundation to reform state government and ensure a brighter future. This puts us on the path to ensuring that all communities can benefit from the economic recovery, no matter how slow it is, and that New Mexico continues to attract people to all parts of our state.

The general public is in the same boat. New Mexico has lost tens of thousands of jobs since the recession began, and families across the state are cutting household expenses and looking for extra income.

It is imperative that we keep a close eye on state operations and that, over the next year, we evaluate ways to achieve even more efficiencies in state government and recommend ways to further streamline government. A thoughtful government reconstructing plan, built upon the foundation laid by the work of former Governor Garrey Carruthers, must be considered this year and presented to the legislature in 2011. The road to economic recovery will not be easily traveled — in fact, some may say it is less like a road and more like a long, winding, uphill footpath — and the legislature and the public will probably be faced with similarly difficult decisions for several years to come. During this journey, we must ensure that the public is well informed, including through a state web site, of all aspects related to state finances.

Our ancestors experienced the Great Depression, the ravages of the dust bowl and health epidemics, all of which help us realize that the challenges we face today are surmountable. Like our ancestors, we have already learned valuable lessons from this economic crisis and have taken steps as a global society to make sure that it does not repeat itself.