

OP-ED Article

By Sen. Pete Campos

ALL NEW MEXICANS RECEIVE DIVIDENDS FROM INVESTMENTS IN JUDICIARY

Properly funding government requires a delicate balancing act to meet the public's needs. We in the Legislature are allocating more than \$6 billion in taxpayer money to ensure New Mexicans receive critical services. A majority of those dollars go to educate our children and provide health care for the needy.

Often overshadowed in the budget debate are the courts and their core mission of delivering fair and timely justice for individuals and businesses.

As a member of the Senate Finance Committee, which helps craft the state's annual budget, I believe the judiciary shouldn't be treated as just another government agency. It's important that the three separate branches of government _ the legislative, executive and judicial_ participate equally in the budget-setting process.

For state government to most effectively serve citizens, we must better coordinate our resources and priorities. We need to make certain each branch of the government has the tools and funding to perform its job. Taxpayers and the economy suffer when that doesn't happen.

We've debated this session how best to grow the economy and create jobs. Much of that discussion traditionally focuses on financial incentives for attracting companies to New Mexico. But we need to remember the courts. A business may be unable to expand its operations if a contract dispute with a supplier drags out in court because of a case backlog.

Another New Mexico priority is protecting our children. In the budget, we're trying to ensure the Children, Youth and Families Department _ a critical executive branch agency _ can hire and retain social workers for abuse and neglect cases.

With more social workers, the state can investigate more reports of abuse and neglect. But we must ensure the courts have the resources to resolve those allegations in a timely manner. It's the children who are at risk if abuse cases become bottlenecked.

This session the House and Senate have worked hard to help the judiciary meet the needs of citizens and employers across New Mexico. We've provided funding that's a minimum of what's necessary for the courts to resolve cases ranging from child abuse, divorces and violent crimes to business disputes, home foreclosures and traffic tickets.

Now is the time to build on our work. We should review how other states fund their courts and consider whether there are budget practices that would improve the way New Mexico prepares its annual blueprint for appropriating taxpayer dollars.

I view the courts as a ready and willing partner in addressing New Mexico's challenges. That was a lesson I learned long ago from watching my uncle, the late Santiago E. Campos, the first Hispanic to serve as a federal judge in New Mexico. He personified what we want from our courts _ integrity, fairness and justice for all. He was a driving force in securing funding and restoring the federal courthouse in Santa Fe, which now bears his name. He knew firsthand that all citizens receive dividends from investments in the judiciary.

Let's work together to align our state budget needs and minimize funding disparities. Let's also dedicate ourselves to better communication and building trusted relationships that will benefit New Mexicans through the effective and efficient operation of state government _ the legislative, executive and judicial branches.

Pete Campos has served in the Senate since 1991. He is a Las Vegas Democrat who represents Senate District 8, which covers parts of Colfax, Guadalupe, Harding, Mora, Quay, San Miguel and Taos counties.

