

Transparency Is a Big Part of Government's Job

By Senator Pete Campos

The public's growing frustration with government, driven in large part by policy disagreements and evaporating revenue for important needs, is compounded each time a public official denies someone access to public information.

The good news is that while we will always have policy differences and never enough money, we can all agree that government agencies and public employees should make government transparency a priority. The public, who after all is paying the bills, deserves to know how its money is being spent.

The public has become distrustful of its government, believing that too much of the information it does receive is "spin" and not enough of it is simply data that will allow citizens to draw their own conclusions. As with most perceptions, some of it is unfounded — the vast majority of public officials take seriously their duty to be transparent — but those of us who are public servants must also admit that much of this perception is based in reality.

Each day, somewhere in New Mexico, citizens, community activists or news reporters are told they cannot have the information they are seeking for any one of a variety of reasons. Whether the reason is legitimate or not (and we have to acknowledge that not all of them are) the public is left with the perception that its government is not being as open as it could or should be.

It is not that the state has not adopted a policy of transparency. The Open Meetings Act makes it clear that "it is declared to be the public policy of this state that all persons are entitled to the greatest possible information regarding the affairs of government and the official acts of those officers and employees who represent them". The Inspection of Public Records Act and the Sunshine Portal Transparency Act are also designed to help make sure that New Mexicans can get as much information as possible about their government.

But we know the reality is different. The New Mexico Foundation for Open Government last year received more than 125 complaints to its hotline about possible violations of the Inspection of Public Records Act and the Open Meetings Act. Each year, the attorney general has no other choice but to chastise far too many government agencies or boards for improperly closing meetings and withholding information.

We can and must do better. More information must be made available on government agencies' web sites and in a way that is easily navigated and understood. More meetings should be webcast so people can follow the work of elected officials without having to drive to the capitol, county building or city hall. Public officials and employees must embrace the idea that providing the public with public records is an important and integral part of their jobs and not an extra duty to be fulfilled only when it is convenient.

As we begin to lower the level of public frustration with government, we will find that we will begin to accomplish more for all the people of New Mexico.