

2020 Legislative Session Preview

By Senator Pete Campos

The work of the 2020 legislative session will set the stage for the new decade. Restructuring our state has begun, and we have a lot of catching up to do. The legislature must create a responsible budget and develop sound policies to ensure New Mexico's continued success. Governor Michelle Lujan Grisham has expressed her interest in extreme risk protection orders, recreational cannabis, tuition-free college and early childhood education. Regarding these topics, as with development of the state budget, communication and research are essential.

The greatest priority in a 30-day, or short, session is the budget. In the most recent budget cycles, New Mexico has had to reestablish itself and recover from revenue shortfalls and recession. This year, oil and gas activity in the southeast corner of the state has dramatically and unsustainably increased the state's revenue by nearly \$800 million. While this funding provides us with the opportunity to develop new programs and grow existing ones, the oil and gas industry is unpredictable as well as harmful to New Mexico's air and water. As we use the additional revenue to invest in our families and future, we must also seek diverse and sustainable revenue sources. The budget is a powerful tool for change. With teamwork and communication, we can develop a strategic plan that prioritizes our state needs and aggressively seeks federal funding streams.

The budgets proposed by both the executive and legislative branches include funding for early childhood education and care. One component of this funding will be offering home visitation services to all expecting parents and families, not just those in urban areas such as Albuquerque and Las Cruces. Evidence-based home visitation programs can connect parents with resources and services that foster essential life skills in their children. Combining visitation with early childhood education will help New Mexico children build a solid foundation for a lifetime of learning.

Public education and higher education frequently and appropriately make up about one-half of the state's budget. This year, teachers should see a three to four percent raise. There is also a likelihood that the *Yazzie/Martinez v. State of New Mexico* lawsuit will be revisited in some fashion, as significant changes to education often require oversight and redirection. We must also protect school district cash balances, which have been repeatedly raided to balance the

state budget. These cash balances are in place to provide students with stable and safe learning environments, not to shore up the state's budget when oil and gas revenues have once again decreased.

Of the governor's several policy initiatives, the New Mexico opportunity scholarship program perhaps received the most media attention. This proposal would make college tuition-free at public colleges and universities in New Mexico by meeting the educational costs not covered by other scholarships or federal financial aid. The recommended legislative budget does not include the \$35 million required to fund the scholarship program. The legislature and educational stakeholders must cooperate to develop a plan to fund the scholarship program and inform the public of how to make the most of this aid. Many other states have implemented variations of tuition-free college. If the opportunity scholarship program is to succeed, we must study the work of New York, Oregon and Tennessee to understand the costs and benefits of the program.

The focus on education should not detract from the many other agencies and programs included in the budget. State funds are used to leverage federal funding for public safety, health and housing. Capital outlay, when used appropriately, acts as a powerful tool to support community health, public safety and economic vitality.

As previously noted, a 30-day session is not necessarily restricted to monetary matters. Bills from the 2019 legislative session — extreme risk protection orders and recreational cannabis in particular — will receive messages from the governor, making them germane. As the legislature considers these and other bills, all stakeholders must be welcomed to the table. To make any meaningful progress, we must have an open dialogue. The breakdown of civil, open discourse only hastens the breakdown of democracy. Truly successful policymaking requires ongoing communication and reasonable, enforceable solutions.

The legalization of recreational cannabis will require careful planning. After several 2019 bills failed to pass the legislature, Governor Lujan Grisham established a task force to examine the issue over the summer. The task force prepared a bill to legalize, regulate and tax the use of recreational cannabis. Legislators must thoroughly review the bill and hear public comment to make certain that we avoid unintended consequences to law enforcement, medical cannabis patients and other interested parties.

With forward-thinking policies and a healthy budget, we can create a new brand for New Mexico. Guadalupe County can greatly benefit from this rebranding. As landmarks such as the Janes Wallace Memorial Park and Power Dam are revitalized, we can add more summer recreation attractions and become known as a destination for travelers and visitors. Guadalupe County can also benefit as New Mexico shifts to clean energy initiatives and value-added agriculture. By believing in each other, we can make the changes needed to keep our communities strong.

I invite all New Mexicans to reach out to me with their questions and concerns this legislative session. In all the discussions to be held this session, the thoughts and ideas of constituents are paramount. I will always vote in the public's best interest when making decisions for our state and our shared future.

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