

Guest Columns

Now's the time for NM lawmakers to take a breath

By Sen. Pete Campos / Las Vegas Democrat

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According to the Merriam-Webster dictionary, discernment means “the quality of being able to grasp and comprehend what is obscure.” The public relies on us, the Legislature, to discern how a proposed bill will impact the state of New Mexico. It is our duty to not only understand the legislation before us but whether the legislation leads to conflict, ambiguities or unintended consequences. The interim, what happens between regular sessions, provides the Legislature with the time and ability to fully comprehend issues and potential legislation so that we do not find ourselves blurry-eyed in a 30- or 60-day regular session.

In New Mexico, our interim period affords us with the time to investigate comprehensive policy positions and organize in-depth analysis of issues concerning the state. We should prepare for the upcoming interim by looking at the bills (that were) before the 55th Legislature and the different directions in which those bills (were) moving. Members introduced legislation to restrict agencies in one area and to broaden that same agency's jurisdiction in another. Other bills seek to re-write well established areas of law without providing context as to why the law needs to change. Instead of pushing through these proposals, our state would be better served by us using the interim to dig-in to these issues, bring differing viewpoints together so we may be fully informed and not reacting to absolutes.

One area that would benefit from an interim period of discernment relates to our natural resources. Now is the time for us to take a holistic approach to address mining, renewable energy and oil and gas. We need to create a comprehensive policy that moves forward sustainability goals for New Mexico's bountiful natural resources while not disadvantaging our economically-challenged communities. It is incumbent upon the Legislature to acknowledge that all of our natural resources benefit New Mexico. We should not be picking winners or losers but directing policy through sound legislation that drives innovation and sustainability.

During the interim divergent voices can be brought together to not only address natural resources but also water and air. This session, as have past sessions, legislation was introduced that in one instance would prohibit an agency from acting and in the next instance would expand its authority. Our environment is better protected when an agency is provided clear guidance by the Legislature and is directed to operate in a transparent and consistent manner.

The interim also allows us, the Legislature, to work together in a more relaxed setting. All sessions are a pressure cooker, causing tensions to rise, yet, the first regular session of the 55th Legislature was even more difficult because of the pandemic. Measures were in place to keep people safe and not spread the COVID-19 virus, for which I am grateful. Alternatively, this does mean that the laid-back conversations on the floor or in members' offices were not happening, leading to fissures in communication. As more New Mexicans receive the vaccine, I am hopeful the affable conversations and rapport shared in the Legislature will return as we conduct more of our business face-to-face.

By working together, we can provide informed solutions to real problems instead of looking for problems in need of solving. The Legislature best serves the public when issues are not forced, when we create a space that allows those with differing experiences and knowledge to come together and put the best interests of New Mexico first.

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