

## Spending in junior bill is not pork

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The elderly, sexual abuse survivors, veterans and others who would have benefited from the now-vetoed Senate Bill 48 likely object to the bill being called "pork," and the dismissive label ignores the review process the bill went through — though that doesn't mean the process can't be improved.

New Mexico is a state with overwhelming need, and while the General Appropriation Act (House Bill 2) addresses the ongoing operations of state government, the surplus of state cash meant the Legislature this year had the unusual opportunity of boosting funding for existing programs, and, in some cases, providing one-time funding for special projects. It is not unusual for spending outside of the operational budget to end up in a bill colloquially called "HB 2 junior," and, long before the legislative session started, the members of the Legislative Finance Committee openly discussed a junior bill for the 2022 session, how much money would be in that bill and how the projects would be selected.

SB 48, which went to the governor with unanimous support from the House and Senate, contained funding for meals for senior citizens, uranium mining cleanup, civil legal services for the poor, grants for victims of crime and many other projects just as important to New Mexicans as the big ticket items in the General Appropriation Act but unlikely to get funding in the primary budget bill.

These projects were carefully selected by individual legislators — the elected state officials with the most intimate understanding of the needs of their communities. With the knowledge the overall spending plan would include a junior appropriation bill, the House Appropriations and Finance Committee and the Senate Finance Committee developed guidelines for legislator-selected projects, which included minimum dollar amounts to ensure projects did not receive meaningless amounts and an assessment of whether the funding would have an immediate and positive impact. Staff worked with individual legislators to make sure the investment of state funds would be meaningful, and in the Senate, I chaired a finance subcommittee that fully vetted each project in open hearings.

Nevertheless, we can improve the process. Criticism of funding legislator-specific projects is not limited to the junior appropriations bill; the issue has also been raised about capital outlay legislation, which also includes major projects selected through a state-level prioritization process and equally important smaller community projects identified by individual lawmakers. In both cases, the issue isn't whether New Mexico needs a way to address the small projects — we absolutely do — but whether each project is properly assessed. Legislation approved in 2021 brought greater transparency to the capital outlay process by creating a public, searchable database of the capital projects with the name of the legislator who proposed it. Perhaps all legislation with legislator-selected projects should include such a database.

The finance committees are already working on additional guidelines and processes for a new junior bill to build on the two rounds of vetting the projects have already undergone. The public, and the governor, should feel confident the appropriations in the bill and the projects they fund are essential to the well-being of New Mexicans and their communities. Whether the veto was appropriate or not, the development of a new bill provides the Legislature and the executive with an opportunity to work together to get these resources to those who need them as quickly as possible to build a stronger New Mexico.

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