

Priorities Moving Forward

By Senator Pete Campos

After spending the past several years trying to dig ourselves out of a financial recession and slow economic growth, New Mexico has the potential for a bright future, but only if we have our priorities in order. On the one hand, the human spirit is dynamic, fluid and persistent and is led by our curiosity and an innate need to address issues that affect our lives and to help one another. At the same time, we are faced with news of shocking crime against children, senseless road accidents, addictions that devastate individuals and families and robberies that can financially cripple small businesses. As the current legislative session winds down, legislators are working hard to balance those two narratives and to identify priorities that will help our state grow while trying to tackle some of the darker issues we face.

Fortunately, we are experiencing an uptick in state revenues that is allowing us to fill some of the gaps left by the past decade's revenue shortfalls. We spent a lot of time during the interim taking state agency and citizen testimony, listening to presentations regarding governmental best practices and processing empirical data analytics. The interim committee meetings produced valuable information that helped us to prioritize where to channel funds that are already available as well as "new" money.

That was the first step in the legislative and executive budget summaries. Then, new consensus revenue forecasts revealed that additional money would be available to replenish state savings accounts from which funds were used to balance past state budgets; increase salaries for teachers, police officers, transportation employees, prison guards and other dedicated state employees; and target programs that enhance law enforcement, early childhood education and Medicaid support.

The perfect scenario seemed imminent coming into the session; there was significant budget agreement, bipartisan and bicameral legislation introduced and a focus on passing a well-vetted budget and capital outlay bills to meet local and statewide infrastructure, building and equipment needs. Now, revenue estimates indicate that we have more money to meet state needs. While this may seem like a no-brainer, since needs still greatly outweigh revenues, it's

not that easy. Vetting must occur in a very short period of time to properly prioritize and allocate additional funds.

It's like a carefully planned family budget that, because of a sudden windfall, allows the family to spend more without sufficiently planning how to do it. Should they find themselves in tough times again, they will look back and wish they had planned better. It's the same with our state budget. We need the upcoming interim to further develop the initiatives that will deliver the best value for the state's new estimated revenues.

More productive initiatives in health care, education, economic development and job growth must be developed. We must prepare to deal with the results of this flu season, projected volatile fire season, a dreaded drought and declines in student enrollment in our schools.

The positive effects of this session mean that we will have a \$6.3 billion budget, new confidence in meeting basic human needs, a healthy reserve of funds and readiness for an interim with reasonable revenue levels for the next fiscal year.

Planning for the future of our state is ongoing. Confidence in stronger programs and services and job growth, and a focus on keeping young workers entering the workforce here at home, will be at the center of New Mexico's progress.