

EDITORIALS

Capital outlay reform lets NM finally invest in itself

A bipartisan bill that would reform this state's extremely inefficient capital outlay system — which should pay for pressing public works projects like roads and water systems, but too often buys wrestling mats, water fountains for dogs, band instruments and even zoo animals — deserves the Legislature's utmost attention.

Senate Bill 262, sponsored by Sen. Joseph Cervantes, D-Las Cruces, and Rep. Kelly Farjado, R-Belen, is a sensible bill that would end decades of wasted spending on pork barrel projects.

Currently, millions of dollars from severance tax bonds is split evenly among the governor, Senate members and House members. That means 113 people get a slice of the pie to spend on "infrastructure," though all too often that definition is stretched to ridiculous lengths. Because no single legislator is able to fully fund a large project, such as expanding a water system or rebuilding an interchange, he or she often appropriates a portion of the funding in hopes of eventually finishing it with future funding. Even worse, a lawmaker sometimes spends the money on small projects that earn brownie points with constituents instead of trying to address more important projects that would have had a positive and lasting impact on the whole community.

And because there's no system in place to prioritize infrastructure projects or to ensure critical projects are ready to begin as soon as they are funded, a lot of money goes unspent, and for years. The result in 2017 is \$969.9 million appropriated to various projects — but never actually used to do anything. That is inefficiency with a capital I.

SB 262 would create an 18-member interim committee of the Legislature that would hold public hearings to evaluate proposed infrastructure projects during the summer and fall before the legislative session begins.

Nine of the members would be appointed by the speaker of the House, and the other nine would be appointed by the Senate's Committees' Committee. Both panels would be required to have the same proportional representation from each major political party as exists in each chamber.

The committee would evaluate projects for their potential to address urgent public health and safety needs, create jobs and leverage other dollars to expand the infrastructure pie. The committee would give careful consideration to the greatest needs of the state in any given year.

That's similar to how the state's annual budget process works and would bring needed transparency to an important legislative process.

While the current system of divvying up infrastructure dollars to each chamber and the governor is popular with lobbyists and politicians, it means the nation's fifth-largest state builds things — or doesn't — based on pure political wants instead of prioritized constituent needs. That's unconscionable, especially in a poor state like New Mexico and especially during the current fiscal crisis. And New Mexico is the only state with such an unjustifiable and unaccountable capital outlay system.

Although governors since Bruce King have tried to reform the state's capital outlay system, many lawmakers consider bringing home the capital outlay pork an investment in their own political futures. It is beyond time for the state to invest in constituents' long-term needs instead. The dismantling of the current system of patronage — which neither produces jobs nor ensures a healthy infrastructure that helps attract new business — is long overdue. The Senate, House and governor should make 2017 the year New Mexico started truly investing in itself.