

Public policy group takes aim at pay-to-play politics

In a thoroughly researched and well-reasoned report, the public policy group Think New Mexico is calling for legislation that would aim to end the pay-to-play culture in New Mexico once and for all — an outright ban on political contributions from lobbyists and state contractors.

Anybody paying even scant attention to state government in recent years would immediately understand the need for such a ban. Former Secretary of State Rebecca Vigil-Giron became the latest in a long line of government officials accused of illegal activities when she was indicted earlier this year on 50 felony counts of embezzlement, kickbacks and money laundering in an alleged scheme that also included two lobbyists and an out-of-state contractor.

Before her, former Senate President Manny Aragon was convicted of pocketing more than \$4 million in kickbacks from the construction of a new courthouse in Bernalillo County. That scheme also involved contractors and lobbyists. Contractors

were part of the scam that landed former treasurers Robert Vigil and Michael Montoya in jail for taking kickbacks on state investments.

Gov. Bill Richardson has escaped federal indictment for his alleged involvement in the use of third-party agents in state investments, but a civil lawsuit in that case is still pending, and the investigation continues.

Beyond these headline-grabbing indictments and convictions, there is a more insidious aspect of the pay-to-play mentality. It has become ingrained into the culture of state government. Lobbyists and contractors eventually come to believe that payments to state officials are just part of the cost of doing business, while state officials come to believe the perks and payments are part of their just reward for holding public office.

In their report, "Restoring Trust: Banning Political Contributions from Contractors and Lobbyists," Think New Mexico traces public corruption in New Mexico to before the days of statehood, when the infamous Santa Fe Ring

plundered the territory. It recounts President Teddy Roosevelt sending a former Rough Rider officer to try to clean things up.

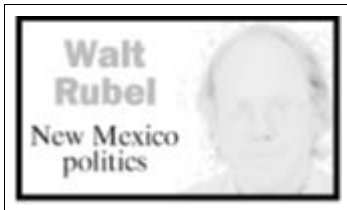
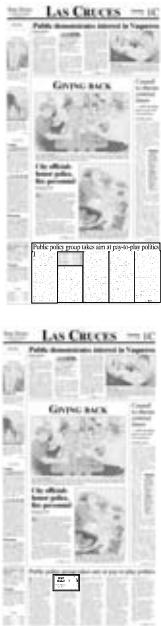
That does not mean there is anything inherent in New Mexico or its people that would make government here more corrupt than in other states. But it does mean that the history of corruption may require more stringent regulations in order to break that cycle.

The state has taken steps toward reform. The Gift Act of 2007 bars lobbyists and contractors of giving gifts of more than \$250 to state officials who will make decisions that could impact them, but does not limit political contributions.

"The enactment of the Gift Act begs the question: if we believe that these groups should not give gifts worth more than \$250, why should they be able to make campaign contributions worth as much as \$4,600 in a single election cycle?" Think New Mexico asks in its report.

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Contractors are also prohibited from making contributions during the period between accepting bids on a projects and when the contractor is selected. That law seems to acknowledge the problem, but does little to remedy it.

The report concluded by noting that similar laws in other states have been upheld by the courts, and have made a real difference in combating corruption.

To learn more about Think New Mexico and this report, go online at www.thinknewmexico.org.

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