

# SANTA FE NEW MEXICAN

The West's oldest newspaper, founded 1849

Robin M. Martin  
*Owner*

Robert M. McKinney  
*Owner, 1949-2001*

Inez Russell Gomez  
*Editorial Page Editor*

Ray Rivera  
*Editor*

## OUR VIEW

# Capital outlay reform can happen

**N**ew Mexico legislators should not squander the opportunity to reform how the state allocates money for capital projects.

To make reform a reality, legislators must display the courage and good sense to push legislation through in the remaining days of the session.

House Bill 307, a bipartisan bill introduced by Rep. Zachary Cook, a Republican, and Sen. Carlos Cisneros, a Democrat, takes apart the current system of how the state allocates money for capital projects and puts it back together again. The result is a system that is fairer, more transparent and less open to political trickery.

This matters because dollars are scarce. Spending infrastructure dollars wisely means the state deals with critical problems first, rather than paying off political favors. Spending dollars wisely, rather than letting them sit unused in the bank means direct infusions of cash in local economies. Spending these dollars wisely, especially in hard times, means jobs when job creation is sluggish.

A New Mexico In Depth analysis showed that "lawmakers appropriated more than \$1.1 billion for more than 2,800 capital outlay projects from 2010 through 2014. But less than half the money has been spent." That's hardly doing the economy any good, not to mention the work that remains to be done. These funds do such things as repair dams, fix roads, renovate buildings or repair waterways.

Instead, what has been happening for decades is that New Mexico squanders the opportunity to make capital dollars work. We are the only state in the country that spends these important funds in such a haphazard manner. Elected officials take the public infrastructure budget and divide it up — using a political formula, with each of the 70 House, 42 Senate members and the governor getting a bit of the bigger pot of money to spread around. You can be sure that as the projects are identified, lobbyists are whispering on behalf of their bosses, influencing how critical dollars are spent.

Rather than a list of projects being put together in secrecy (the 2015 capital outlay bill wasn't even posted on the Legislature's website until after the special session passing it ended), a council of experts would be appointed by the Legislature and the governor. These people — architects, engineers, builders and the like — would rank projects submitted by state agencies and local governments. They would use a list of objective criteria, including whether the project is ready to begin, to develop a list of how the money will be spent. The Legislature would approve the final plan.

Time may be running out, but HB 307 had its first committee hearing Monday and could be on its way with a vote Wednesday in the House Government, Elections and Indian Affairs Committee. Then, another committee and a House vote and it's on to the Senate.

For this important reform to pass, legislators must not be afraid to give up power. We were disappointed to hear the usually common-sense Sen. Daniel Ivey-Soto, D-Albuquerque, tell *New Mexican* reporter Steve Terrell that the reform is being "imposed from the outside."

The Legislature has had decades to improve the process and has failed to do so. Reform is being pushed by the nonpartisan Think New Mexico group (which also helped "impose" full-day kindergarten, a restructured Public Regulation Commission and removal of the gross receipts tax on food). Surely, legislators aren't so enamored of their own power that they can't take a good idea — whatever its source — and run with it.

All along, we have said this 30-day session should focus on improving New Mexico's economy. This bill, endorsed by both unions and pro-business groups, would do just that. Time is short, but legislators must make sure the clock does not run out on this necessary reform.