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Robin M. Martin, Editor and Publisher
Robert M. McKinney, Editor and Publisher, 1949-2001

William W. Waters,
Editorial Page Editor

Robert Dean,
Managing Editor

202 E. Marcy St. • Santa Fe, N.M. 87501

Food-tax repeal was team effort

Seventy-two years after it was enacted as a temporary measure to keep the bureaucracy running and roads repaired during the Depression, our state's tax on grocery foods at last has been lifted.

Will folks notice the change — or will price-creep gobble that savings and then some? Will cash-strapped local governments raise their gross-receipts taxes on nonfood purchases?

For now, at any rate, the tab's a tad lower on a basic necessity, the cost of which can strangle lower-income families.

For that, we can thank Think New Mexico, a bipartisan public-policy research organization that doesn't just ponder great ideas and twiddle its thumbs; it's a "think tank" dedicated to turning workable ideas into accomplishments.

Full-day kindergarten was its first campaign. That late-1990s notion now is a statewide reality. Coming up in this year's legislative session is a second effort toward a strategic water reserve — a Think proposal with growing appeal among our senators and representatives.

The food-tax repeal was approved during last year's short legislative session. It was proposed as a "revenue-neutral" measure: A sharp boost in the cigarette tax would make up for the loss of grocery food money flowing into the state treasury.

As it turned out, a 70-cents-a-pack smoke-tax increase went toward The University of New Mexico's medical center. To cover the food impost, the Legislature raised the municipal gross-receipts rate on other goods, services and such.

Still, it's better to see a higher tax on goods that include lots of nonnecessities than any at all on food.

Persuading our lawmakers to end the regressive tax on food was no easy matter. Think New Mexico needed evidence to make its case; that meant extensive, expensive studies.

And for that, Think's director, Fred Nathan, figures credit is owing to a bunch of organizations from around here or whose donors have New Mexico ties.

Many of those trusts and foundations are long known for their many good works — by themselves or as team members in community development. In the food-tax effort, they contributed greatly to a persuasive case — and to a tax reform in which our legislators, notably House Speaker Ben Luján, and Gov. Bill Richardson can take pride.