
THE SANTA FE
NEW MEXICAN

Thursday, January 25, 2007

The West's Oldest Newspaper

Founded 1849

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

OUR VIEW

Lottery reform overdue; Senate bill would do it

Twelve years after creating the New Mexico Lottery, the state Legislature is considering an overdue tune-up.

Senate Majority Leader Michael Sánchez this week introduced a bill demanding that 30 percent of its revenues go into college scholarships. Only 24 percent has been reaching our state's students under the current arrangement. But the lottery-operating contract with a national company known as GTech runs out next year — and now's the time to have a law in place so the share of the money can be shifted in favor of education.

The lottery reworking was thought up by Think New Mexico, a bipartisan public-policy research organization with an impressive record of reforms — full-day kindergarten, public preschools, the end of state sales tax on food and the beginnings of a strategic water reserve among them.

So when Think called legislative attention to other states' shares of lottery receipts — 35 percent in Georgia, Kentucky, North Carolina and Oklahoma — some of our senators and representatives got curious. And, confronted with the possibility that the Lottery Success Scholarship Fund could be running a multimillion-dollar deficit within just a few years, the need for a new look at the deal became obvious.

Bracing for scrutiny and facing a financial bite, the lottery decided to hire one of the state's smoother lobbyists: \$32,000 for some part-time effort on behalf of the status quo. Thirty-two thou to keep from paying out perhaps \$9 million more per year? What a bargain.

But those five figures alone amount to a fair chunk of scholarship money — and the idea of state dollars being spent to keep a bum deal going is patently offensive. As for the \$9 million, it would support a good 2,000 scholarships. When Gov. Bill Richardson got wind of this, he told his lottery people to forget hiring a lobbyist.

GTech, no doubt, will send a few slick suits into the Roundhouse now that Sánchez' bill is in the hopper — but there they'll find more than Fred Nathan, former special counsel to then-Attorney General Tom Udall and now Think's director, in their way; the Santa Fe Community Foundation, the statewide Association of Commerce and Industry and the state's association of community colleges are among several groups in support of the measure.

It includes requirements that the Lottery Authority follow state procurement law during the contract-bidding process, clears up reserve-fund language, and adds two members to the authority's seven-member board of directors: one representing New Mexico's four-year colleges and one representing the two-year schools.

The lottery's 50-percent minimum return to players likely will remain in place, making its various games more appealing than the notion of simply wadding up dollar bills and throwing them away — even though the latter activity makes almost as much sense.

Still, more than 40,000 families benefiting from scholarships can be glad so many of their fellow New Mexicans find the lottery worth playing. If they like it now, they'll like it better if Sen. Sánchez' colleagues approve these modifications.