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OUR VIEW

Don't let PRC outrage fade

It's to be expected that not everyone will love a reform — after all, corruption exists because someone is benefiting when the system's spoils are spread around. Think New Mexico's proposal to reform the Public Regulation Commission, while widely hailed, already is meeting stumbling blocks from people who stand to lose under some of the proposals for change.

Two of the loudest opponents are on the PRC right now. Commissioners Theresa Becenti-Aguilar and Ben Hall say they will fight the proposals, especially ones that would require candidates for the commission to have either a college degree or significant professional experience. They also don't like stripping the PRC of some of its responsibilities. Hall's opposition is particularly stark: "I will see that bill is killed."

Thankfully, Chairman Pat Lyons and Jason Marks of Albuquerque are expressing support for reform in general, if not for all of Think New Mexico's proposals. (Just imagine, bipartisan support! Lyons is a Republican; Marks a Democrat.) The fifth seat on the commission is empty because of Jerome Block Jr.'s resignation after pleading guilty to several felonies — just the latest scandal in the PRC's short history.

Support for reforms — whether Think New Mexico's or those being put together by commission Chief of Staff Johnny Montoya or others that might be proposed by legislators or the governor — needs to be near-universal to get legislation written, approved and then approved again in an election to amend the Constitution. It's important that the public stay engaged on this issue after the Block Jr. headlines fade.

We'd agree with Becenti-Aguilar and Hall that a college education isn't an antidote to sleazy practices — plenty of educated people embezzle, cheat and otherwise betray the public trust. The education component is less about ethics and more about the need to have knowledgeable people — about utilities, regulation, rate structures, alternative energy — on this body. Consumers can't afford the steep learning curve when a commissioner who doesn't understand the structure of a rate increase takes a seat, for example.

The need for knowledge, of a specialized and complicated type, is another reason to split apart the PRC's duties. Not having to understand fire safety, or insurance regulations, or the ins and outs of train track safety, might make it easier to get up to speed on other matters.

Finally, while we disagree with Becenti-Aguilar and Hall on proposed reforms, it's good to see people discussing how best to strengthen and improve the PRC. There needs to be a conversation about this agency, its duties and its obligations to the citizens of this state. Their opposition, wrongheaded as it might be, is a good jumping-off point to the discussions that must follow. Because discuss we must, and then, come January, act.