

Title: **New Mexico's Rankings Symptom of Real Problem**
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New Mexico's Rankings Symptom of Real Problem

New Mexicans long ago grew weary of leading national lists with negative attributes and holding the cellar on the lists with positive results.

The land of enchantment routinely leads lists such as poor school test scores and graduation rates, high poverty rates, poor health care, addictions (and related deaths) and domestic violence. We're in the basement in quality of life, job growth, opportunities and safety. These are symptoms of the real problem: a dearth of qualified, competent, honest leaders.

Fred Nathan and his group at Think New Mexico plan to tackle a sacred cow at the 2016 legislature. Nathan wants legislators to stop funding their pet projects in a piecemeal fashion, ignoring the real infrastructure needs of New Mexicans.

It's routinely called pork barrel spending and we are strangled by it.

The state Legislative Council Service showed in 2015 there were 994 projects funded with \$295 million. The peak of waste was 2006 when \$861 million funded 4,274 projects. Some of these projects are needed. Most are simply politicians taking money home to those who supported him or her, including in many cases

lobbyists (more about them later).

Nathan listed a few of the poor appropriations in Think's annual report. One 2005 project was a \$50,000 paving project on private land where a registered lobbyist happened to live. Another was \$65,000 for a public sculpture garden in Santa Fe. That's what Santa Fe needs, more art projects. Fortunately, the city turned away the money when it couldn't even find the sculptor who had proposed the project.

Additionally, most of the pet projects are multi-year requests. Much of the money requested sits unused for many years or is not used at all. In 2014, 852 projects were funded with \$229 million in taxpayer money. Of those 852 projects, 701 showed \$174 million in unspent funds. That's money that could be used to accomplish badly needed real infrastructure work in the state, such as repairing/replacing highways and bridges.

New Mexico is the only state in the country that allows elected officials to decide infrastructure spending. Most states decide infrastructure funding by committee. Committees range from small to large, minority and majority members, with some requiring construction industry, lawyers or bankers on them.

What all committees have in common is they're all working for the greater good of the state, not the individual politicians wanting to buy their next re-election by funding pet projects with our money. One poor politician is quoted in Think's literature as honestly stating, of course we have to take money home to constituents. How else can we get re-elected? Here's a thought: do something solid.

We wish Nathan luck and will do what we can to help him to succeed.

But he's asking legislators to revoke their own license to legally steal taxpayer money. That's a tall order, sort of like asking them to be accountable and enforce some ethics.

A few weeks after Nathan released Think's next legislative project the 2015 State Integrity Investigation released the state's report card. To no one's surprise, New Mexico has abysmal results.

According to the release, "New Mexico scored only 61, a letter grade of D-, and landed tied for 34th place in the 2015 State Integrity Investigation, an assessment of state government accountability and transparency conducted by the Center for Public Integrity and Global Integrity. Behind the score: widespread and systemic weaknesses in overseeing eth-

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ics, campaign finance and lobbying.”

There's that pesky lobbying thing again. While we did no better than a B- in internal auditing, the really weak spots were in public access to information, political financing, lobbying disclosure, ethics enforcement and executive and legislative accountability. Those were all Fs.

In short, our public “leaders” are running amok and the mechanisms to see just how poorly they're performing are not in place. More importantly, there is no process in place to rein them in. And who can put those measurements and processes in place? The people who need to be properly measured, and disciplined.

The lack of ethics in the entire Roundhouse is not news. Manny Aragon's kickback scheme on Albuquerque's judicial center a decade ago was not an isolated theft. He just got caught. Most recently we've lived through former secretary of state Dianna Duran and state senator

Phil Griego resigning instead of facing further inquiry. Again, not isolated, they just got caught. They're also both still eligible for their state pensions.

Common Cause, a New Mexico non-profit working to reform state and local government, has an effort in place to take the money out of politics by exposing who funds lobbyists and myriad political action committees. You can go to their web site and sign a form letter asking for reform (www.commoncause.org)

The Public Regulation Commission has its own unique lack of oversight and ethics.

This behavior begins with city and county boards where future state politicians are trained on how to use taxpayer money to their personal benefit. We have a very healthy crop locally. Many are ready to move up to the triple A league and steal from state taxpayers.

Until New Mexico gets a handle

on its miserable ethics record, lack of accountability at many levels and starts tying capital projects to real needs, we will continue to bounce along the bottom of many lists. That's where many (not all) of our politicians are comfortable, with other bottom feeders.