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Dispatch New Mexico

Think New Mexico's latest brainstorm

by Tom McDonald

It should be no surprise to any of my regular readers that I'm a big fan of Think New Mexico. It's important to our state to have a nonpartisan think tank researching quality-of-life issues and pushing for changes, especially in the Legislature, that benefit all New Mexicans instead of a self-interested few. Plus, it has a track record for actually getting things done, which is a much better alternative to the noise that typically comes out of partisan rhetoric.

That said, I'm glad to read about Think NM's latest crusade, taking on an antiquated and too-political capital outlay process that's long been overdue for an overhaul. It's an ambitious undertaking, but the time may indeed be right for this kind of good-government reform.

The issue is the way in which the "Christmas Tree Bill" — called that by lawmakers because of the gifts doled out to their districts at the end of each session — gets systematically approved. Through a process created in 1977, it works like this:

Each year, municipalities, counties and other governmental entities around the state present to their lawmakers their wish list of infrastructure improvements, with the hope of getting their projects funded in full or in part. Our senators and representatives then take these requests into the upcoming session and submit their district's capital requests.

Then, behind closed doors, a capital spending bill is created and "prioritized" projects around the state get funding with the bill's passage.

The bills fund an average of 1,500 projects with about \$300 million in taxpayer money, according to Think New Mexico.

There are a number of problems inherent to this way of funding capital projects such as road and bridge work, dam repairs, water system improvements and more.

It's based more on politics than actual need. Money is wasted as unnecessary capital requests rise above more urgent needs. And it's politically divisive — Think NM says that capital outlay bills have failed to pass six times in the past two decades because of feuding between Democrats and Republicans.

Even Pete Campos, a state senator since 1991 who's known for his ability to bring the bacon home to his northern New Mexico district, calls the system "archaic, parochial and highly political."

Campos was actually the first lawmaker to call my attention to the flawed approach to capital funding. The fact that he's been pushing reforms — when his district has repeatedly benefited from his prowess in the process — suggests that this may indeed be the opportune time to change the process.

Think NM and its executive director, Fred Nathan, and staff have completed the research necessary to highlight the problem and propose a solution. That's what I like about Nathan and his fellow thinkers — they do their homework before suggesting answers. That clears the path toward an improved government process, and this time around is no exception.

In highlighting this problem for the 2016 legislative session, Think NM is proposing legislation to create a transparent, merit-based system for infrastructure expenditures using the model for funding the state's capital projects for schools, a process that includes an independent body that prioritizes project requests according to need.

Think New Mexico's recommendation is to create a "capital outlay planning board" that's made up of qualified appointees from the legislative and executive branches — not elected officials. The board would prioritize projects according to a set of specified criteria and its top projects would then go to the Legislature for funding.

It makes sense, and it's sorely needed. The process we have now is costly, ineffective and way too political. Think's latest report lays out a much better alternative.

Think New Mexico's modus operandi is to do the research and complete the report — this one is titled "The Story of the Christmas Tree Bill: Fixing Public Infrastructure Spending in New Mexico" and is available to order at thinknewmexico.org — before a concerted push for action. Expect to read more about this latest issue as we approach next year's legislative session, when New Mexico's own reputable think tank pushes it forward.

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