

ALBUQUERQUE JOURNAL



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AN INDEPENDENT NEWSPAPER

Published at Journal Center, 7777 Jefferson NE
Albuquerque, NM 87109-4343, by the Journal Publishing Co.
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Sunday, February 7, 2016

EDITORIALS

Carve out the time to fix capital outlay funding

Last week, key House and Senate lawmakers joined Gov. Susana Martinez in support of finally moving to allocate public infrastructure dollars based on true needs rather than political wants.

Also last week, a new transportation research study reported “25 percent of major locally and state-maintained roads are in poor condition ... 32 percent are in mediocre or fair condition (and) 16 percent of New Mexico’s bridges are structurally deficient or functionally obsolete.”

And last week, some lawmakers said there probably isn’t enough time to approve the former in order to address the kind of challenges revealed by the latter.

At a time when state oil and gas revenues are plummeting, when an expected \$285 million in new money has become just \$30 million and lawmakers are doing the equivalent of turning over couch cushions looking for loose change to make ends meet, it makes zero sense to continue to hand out capital outlay dollars based on a political formula that guarantees the public won’t get the most bang for its bucks.

New Mexico is the only state that lets its politicians divvy up the infrastructure budget with no regard for what the money will be used for — one third each goes to the Senate, House and governor. House Bill 307 is a bipartisan solution by Rep. Zach Cook, R-Ruidoso, and Sen. Carlos Cisneros, D-Questa, to change that.

Based on the system used in Oklahoma, the legislation would establish a planning council to prioritize, vet and monitor the way New Mexico funds its infrastructure projects — this year about \$123 million from severance tax bonds is available (down from \$140 million due to those plummeting prices). The 13 members of the council would be appointed by the Legislature and governor and would include legislative and executive branch officials along with members of the public with required areas of expertise.

A spokesman for the governor says the bill “certainly takes a step in the right direction ... and we’re happy to work with legislators in both parties on a solution that would help us better meet New Mexico’s significant infrastructure needs.”

To be clear, the TRIP transportation study shows those needs are not being met now. Instead, money is going to small projects like toilets, senior center kitchen supplies and short lengths of sidewalk. While the folks who will use those amenities will appreciate them, in a state with such huge infrastructure needs, it amounts to buying nice knick-knacks instead of a new roof before the monsoons hit.

It’s bad enough to fund projects that don’t make a difference, worse yet that many of those are not done, or are done poorly. Around \$788 million in public money is on the sidelines, some since 2009, because 2,146 infrastructure projects are not ready, not fully funded or not wanted. The now \$12.1 million Mora County Courthouse is a half-finished shell. And the \$6.7 million Cabresto Lake Dam near Questa leaks.

Yet despite tangible examples of the system not working, the Legislature’s strong patron politics will make passing this reform an uphill battle. Governors since Bruce King have tried, but many lawmakers consider bringing home the capital outlay pork an investment in their political futures.

Rep. Jason Harper, R-Rio Rancho, chairman of the House Ways and Means Committee, says “we’re already at the halfway point of the 30-day session, and it hasn’t gotten its first hearing. I think the chances of it passing are slim.”

Harper and Cisneros have been collaborating on ways to improve our capital outlay system — considered the 49th worst in the nation. The current legislation is modeled on a proposal by Santa Fe-based think tank Think New Mexico.

FYI, there is more than a week left in the 2016 session, and the current, dysfunctional system made it through the 1977 Legislature and passed unanimously in just 48 hours. Lawmakers need to do the public’s work and make the time to reform capital outlay; New Mexico can no longer afford to fund political wants instead of the state’s most pressing needs.