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EDITORIALS

A Better PRC Gets 5 Votes Closer to Reality

Five House committees down, a floor vote, the Senate and the governor to go.

Then New Mexicans can weigh in on whether they want to keep a Public Regulation commission saddled with too much responsibility and plagued by unqualified commissioners, or switch to one that serves taxpayers and ratepayers.

Three measures — each with bipartisan sponsorship — have made it through the House committees with unanimous backing. If approved by the full House, their Senate committees, the full Senate and the governor, they would go to the voters.

The full House as well as the Senate and governor should take note of the PRC's dysfunctional track record as well as the unanimous votes these proposed reforms have received in five House committees:

■ House Joint Resolution 11 (Reps. Joseph Cervantes, D-Las Cruces, and Minority Leader Tom Taylor, R-Farmington) would ask voters to establish educational and professional qualifications for PRC commissioners, who currently only have to meet the painfully low bar of being at least 18, a New Mexico resident for a year and felony-free.

■ HJR 16 (Reps. Majority Leader Ken Martinez, D-Grants, and Taylor) would ask voters to remove the embarrassing backlog of corporation reporting and registration from PRC oversight and streamline those duties with business registrations and filings at the Secretary of State's Office, like 35 other states.

■ HJR 17 (Reps. Kiki Saavedra, D-Albuquerque, and Taylor) would ask voters to remove insurance from PRC oversight and create a Superintendent of Insurance to be nominated by an independent, nonpartisan committee, appointed by the governor and confirmed by the Senate in the same manner as judges. Thirty-seven states do this already.

There's bipartisan backing lined up in the Senate; all will be carried by Sen. Linda Lopez, D-Albuquerque, joined by Minority Whip Bill Payne, R-Albuquerque, on the qualifications amendment, Minority Leader Stuart Ingle, R-Portales, on the corporations amendment and Sen. Carroll Leavell, R-Jal, on the insurance amendment. PRC Chairman Pat Lyons and Commissioners Jason Marks and Doug Howe support the reforms.

In light of this level on consensus, can anyone argue we need to keep doing what we've been doing?

In addition to these proposed reforms, similar legislation by Sens. Tim Keller, D-Albuquerque, and Rep. Brian Egolf, D-Santa Fe, would improve the PRC while streamlining state government.

Keller's Senate Joint Resolution 2/Egolf's HJR 14 would scrap the down-ballot election of commissioners in favor of gubernatorial appointment — with more specific qualification requirements than HJR 11, i.e. at least a bachelor's degree or five years of relevant professional experience. And Keller's SB 77 would transfer PRC oversight of railroads to the Department of Transportation, its Insurance Fraud Bureau to the Attorney General's Office and, like HJR 16, corporations to the Secretary of State.

Yes, the PRC has made some improvements, ordering up a management study and adopting rules for vehicle and credit-card use. It's important the likes of former commissioner Jerome Block Jr. can no longer abuse a state gas card and a Lyons can no longer tool around in a government F-250 on personal business, but the bottom line is the commission is structurally flawed.

These reforms, drafted and advocated by nonprofit Think New Mexico, address the underlying problems and deserve to go to the voters.