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Editorial

Reform of state spending bill is still needed

One of several needed reforms that failed to pass this year during the brief 30-day legislative session was a bill to bring order and structure to the state's antiquated and inefficient capital outlay system.

Every year, legislators authorize millions of dollars to be spent on construction projects that aren't needed, aren't vetted and aren't have enough funding to complete. The result is hundreds of millions, if not billions of dollars sitting in various funds, unable to be put to work. State Auditor Tim Keller has estimated New Mexico has as much as \$1.2 billion allocated to incomplete capital outlay projects.

The inefficiency of the capital outlay process was perhaps more tolerable in the days of high oil and gas prices fueling healthy state budgets with plenty of new revenue to spend. But that waste is far less tolerable this year.

Faced with falling oil and gas prices driving down state revenue, lawmakers made deep cuts this year, especially in the area of higher education.

The capital outlay bills passed this year without the

drama of last year, when legislators had to come back to Santa Fe for a special session to get the bills passed. But, an analysis by New Mexico In Depth found that this year's legislation shares many of the same problems with past bills. Too many projects have partial funding – not money enough to get the project completed.

And, like all previous bills, this one was put together without statewide coordination, prioritization or review. For example, Sen. Carroll H. Leavell, R-Jal, requested 52 projects at a total cost of \$161.4 million, making no effort to prioritize.

"I get that many requests from my constituents. I'm just simply passing them through," he said. One would assume that some of those 52 projects were more important than others, but there is no effort to separate needs from wants.

Legislation to establish a commission that would review projects, prioritize the most important and ensure that they had the funded needed to be finished on time was rejected. But, momentum does seem to be building toward a change.

The public policy group

Think New Mexico has made reform of the capital outlay system a top priority. And, investigative reporting by New Mexico In Depth, in cooperation with several newspapers including the Sun-News, has helped to highlight just how poorly the current system is now working.

"I refuse to quit because a quick look around the state reveals just how vast our need is: depending on how you estimate it, New Mexico's infrastructure needs could be close to \$10 billion. Our current approach simply won't work if we are to address a sum so large," Sen. Pete Campos, D-Las Vegas, said in a guest column to the Sun-News.

Change won't be easy. The current system may not serve the taxpayers well, but for legislators it ensures that they will get at least partial credit for whatever pork is brought to the district. Reform, for them, means sacrificing personal credit for the good of the state.

That was a big ask in an election year. We hope reformers will have a better chance next year.

— *The Las Cruces Sun-News*