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Editorial

Think tank joins call to reform state spending

We are pleased to welcome Think New Mexico as a new ally in what has become an ongoing effort to reform the inefficient and wasteful capital outlay spending process in New Mexico.

The Santa Fe-based think tank takes on a different issue each legislative session, and has a pretty good track record. Repeal of the food tax, reform of the state lottery and constitutional changes to the Public Regulation Commission were all initiatives Think New Mexico successfully lobbied for.

Now they have turned their attention to the state's annual divvying of the pork, a mysterious process by which lawmakers are able to secretly divert precious state funds to friends, lobbyists and worthy causes alike, all at their complete discretion.

The process has resulted in millions of dollars being appropriated that are not needed or wanted, or that lack the money needed for completion. Journalists at New Mexico In Depth reported recently that less than half of the \$1.1 billion appropriated for capital outlay projects from 2010 through 2014 has actually been spent. The rest is languishing in the

pipeline, awaiting approvals. Much of it will never be spent, reverting back instead to the state. Some will be used to start projects that are never finished – such as the state veterans museum that was to be built in Las Cruces.

The process was written by legislators and to the benefit of legislators. They have complete discretion as to how their share of the pie will be spent. Taxpayers wanting to track how their senator or representative spent their capital outlay money can't do so without their permission. A document request filed under the state's open records law seeking a breakdown of the amount appropriated by each legislator in the final capital outlay bill was denied, with the explanation that the information was privileged, but could be released by each individual legislator should they choose to do so.

That recipe for corruption has led to predictable results over the years, as Think New Mexico lays out in its report outlining the history of the process, starting with the "Christmas Tree bill" in 1977, so called because it had "a present in it for everyone."

It was jammed through in the final two days of the session with such little scrutiny that news reports were unclear on even the final price tag. And that's pretty much how it has worked ever since. The capital outlay bill passed this year came months after the session ended, approved in a one-day special session with no meaningful debate or discussion.

Think New Mexico does not spell out exactly what its legislation would call for, but suggests, as we have in the past, that the process look more like the one used to fund bricks and mortar process for our schools.

Under pressure from the courts, capital spending on schools is now governed by a uniform set of standards overseen by the Public Schools Capital Outlay Council. Projects get prioritized, districts are required to provide matching funds based on a sliding scale, and money gets spent efficiently.

There is a right way and a wrong way to do this. Legislators will choose the wrong way if we let them. They will only change this process if there is a loud, unified chorus demanding that they do so. We welcome the voice of Think New Mexico.