

# THE DAILY TIMES

FARMINGTON NEW MEXICO

## Voters to decide proposed reforms of PRC, public defender

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Posted: 02/16/2012 11:53:35 PM MST

SANTA FE — State legislators headed home Thursday, but they left behind four high-profile issues for voters to decide.

Three of the reforms would involve the state Public Regulation Commission, an agency under a floodlight of scrutiny during the last year.

The other proposal would make the state public defender's office an independent part of government, rather than a part of the governor's administration.

All four proposals will be on the ballot in November.

Rep. Antonio "Moe" Maestas, D-Albuquerque, is leading the push to make the public defender autonomous from the governor.

Maestas, a one-man reformer, had an easier time than the public policy

organization Think New Mexico. It was behind the bills to revamp the PRC and increase qualifications for the state's five regulatory commissioners.

Two of those bills made it through the Legislature in the last 30 minutes of the session.

Rep. Tom Taylor of Farmington, leader of the minority Republicans in the House of Representatives, stopped a filibuster by one of his members so the PRC bills could be cleared for the ballot.

Public regulation commissioners make \$90,000 a year, but the jobs now call for minimal credentials. A commissioner must only be at least 18 years old, a resident of the state and have no felony convictions.

Fred Nathan, executive director of Think New Mexico, said the commissioners' jobs are highly technical, requiring skills similar to judges.

Sen. Michael Sanchez, D-Belen, criticized Nathan over the last week for not discussing his reform plan with tribal governments.

A counterpoint came Thursday from Sen. Lynda Lovejoy, D-Crownpoint. She supported the push for greater qualifications for PRC members.

Lovejoy, a Navajo who served eight years on the PRC, said tribal members do not need or want watered-down credentials. Tribes have produced countless accomplished people who could meet higher qualifications to serve on the PRC, she said.

If voters approve the concept, the Legislature next year would create precise qualifications.

The other two reforms proposed for the PRC involve missions, not specific criteria.

One would remove from the PRC the job of chartering corporations and shift those responsibilities to the secretary of state.

Nathan said this would allow the PRC to focus on its core mission of regulating utilities and telecommunications. He said it also would make life easier for businesses, which now make administrative reports to both the PRC and the secretary of state.

The other change would remove the insurance division from the PRC and make it an independent entity. Legislators would appoint the superintendent of insurance.

Sen. Carroll Leavell, R-Jal, said the change would be wise.

Leavell said no state but New Mexico mixes utility regulation with supervision of the insurance industry