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## For Ben and Bill, tax-reform triumph

**B**en Luján was as good as his word: The Speaker of New Mexico's House of Representatives rounded up 39 colleagues in support of legislation removing the gross-receipts tax from grocery-store food purchases. With his own vote, that made it 40-27 in the chamber he rules. Lest his District 46 constituents or the rest of New Mexico think the food-tax proposal he and Gov. Bill Richardson had agreed on was only a charade, Luján flexed his considerable muscle on behalf of consumers.

Nor did the speaker stop when the measure went to the Senate. Through a couple of hard days' wrangling in that chamber, Luján alternately turned on the charm, twisted some arms, called in favors and, we're guessing, put himself in some senators' debt on behalf of food-tax repeal. The governor, meanwhile, was doing much of the same: Richardson was on the phone, and face to face, with every representative and senator with whom he figured he had an ounce of influence. In a reprise of his days in the Democratic whip organization on Capitol Hill, the governor sweated every vote.

Late yesterday morning, their efforts, aided by those of Santa Fe County's senators — Román Maes, Nancy Rodríguez, Phil Griego and Carlos Cisneros — paid off: Half an hour before adjournment, the Legislature approved the food-tax reform.

As Lovington Republican Earlene Roberts noted, the bill amounts to more of a tax shift than a tax cut: The sales tax on other goods goes up by half a percent. But most non-food spending isn't on essentials. The food-tax cut is expected to average more than \$50 a year per household; tax-reform advocates figure the benefit will be more than \$100.

As important politically as the monetary savings is the message it sends to all New Mexicans: Tax reform is for everyone, not just for the fat cats benefiting from last year's income-tax cuts; working families from all income levels deserve relief, too.

It isn't often that politicians are served such an opportunity to demonstrate their allegiance to "the little people"; to make the voters forget, for the moment, that their elected representatives and senators are at the beck and call of Big Liquor, Big Tobacco and other worthy subjects of serious taxation.

Those two Bigs emerged largely unscathed from this tax reform — and, of course, it wouldn't have been achieved during this short session had booze or ciggies been the only sources of the revenue make-up.

This rush-to-adjournment drama, and its happy ending, stands as evidence that politics indeed is the art of the possible. The House Speaker, when approached by the governor to team with him in this tax-cut rally, could see that the time was ripe for reform. He put his persuasive powers to work on it — and, during a session of short tempers, kept his own intact.

This, to our way of thinking, was one of Ben Luján's finest hours.