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OUR VIEW

Don't let up on PRC reform

The effort to reform the Public Regulation Commission this legislative session is gaining steam — and that's as it should be and must be. We cannot let the outrage that still exists because of former Commissioner Jerome Block Jr.'s behavior — stealing gasoline from the state, misusing credit cards and failing to do his well-paid job with even a smidgen of care or expertise — go to waste. After all, his shenanigans were just the latest scandal in an agency plagued by them.

Now, spurred by Think New Mexico, several leading House members — a bipartisan group — have prepared resolutions to take the question of PRC reform before the voters in November 2012. That step is necessary, of course, because the PRC is established by a constitutional amendment, as was its predecessor agency, the Corporation Commission. These reforms would focus the PRC's core mission, as well as improve the quality of commissioner candidates.

House Joint Resolution 11, sponsored by Democratic Rep. Joseph Cervantes of Las Cruces and Republican House Minority Leader Tom Taylor of Farmington, would require candidates for the PRC to have, at a minimum, either a college degree or significant and relevant professional experience.

Truth be told, we would prefer to see the PRC go to an appointed board — the issues before it are so complex that an appointment process along the lines of the judicial-selection system would be best. However, such a change is unlikely, and improving the qualifications of candidates is a step in the right direction. While having a degree does not guarantee an ethical nature, it does indicate a level of seriousness and intellectual capacity necessary to serve on the commission.

A second piece of legislation, House Joint Resolution 16, sponsored by Taylor and House Majority Leader Ken Martinez of Grants, takes authority over the reporting and registration of corporations away from the PRC and moves it to the Secretary of State's Office. It's a natural home for such transactions, because the Secretary of State's Office already handles reporting and registration for several types of businesses. This just gathers the responsibility in one place.

The third piece of this reform effort also removes a PRC responsibility — this one, over insurance. House Joint Resolution 17, sponsored by Rep. Kiki Saavedra, a Democrat from Albuquerque, and Taylor, takes insurance out of the PRC and also reforms how the superintendent of insurance will be selected. What this does is take politics away from regulating insurance — the new superintendent would be vetted by a nonpartisan selection committee, appointed by the governor and confirmed by the state Senate.

The constitutional approach to reform is not all that is happening to improve the PRC. The agency itself, recognizing the very real problems it faces, is digging deep to make necessary changes now. Those include reducing the number of exempt, or political, appointees, to improve the professionalism of the agency. For consumers, there would be a beefed-up Consumer Relations Division, giving citizens a place to go for help. It should be noted, too, that the PRC-initiated reforms have been nearly a year in the making and that they came from commissioners themselves.

Everyone, it seems, is ready to improve the status quo. We especially commend the legislators who are working across the aisle to make needed change, as well as Gov. Susana Martinez, who is backing reform. Now let's take these good intentions and move ahead — whatever other important bills and issues have yet to be heard in the 2012 legislative session, none has the far-reaching impact of reforming the Public Regulation Commission. This is one crisis New Mexico cannot afford to waste.