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William W. Waters,
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Robert Dean,
Managing Editor

202 E. Marcy St. • Santa Fe, N.M. 87501

Real ethics reform in special session?

So what else should Gov. Bill Richardson ask state legislators to consider when they're called into special session four days from now?

As little as possible, considering how little our senators and representatives accomplished during the 30-day regular session that ended Thursday — not with a bang, but a whimper, as a poet once put it.

Just getting the Senate and the House to agree on a budget will be something: The House bill, heavier on taxes than on spending cuts, and the Senate bill, totally out of whack when it came to taxing tortillas, cannot have been as close to resolution as legislative leaders and the governor were claiming at session's end. Nor did either bill take into consideration that revenues for this year might be even skimpier than originally guessed at.

The governor is rushing the special session, claiming that there was momentum toward a budget — the one thing the session was charged with passing — and that it'll be lost if he waits to convene the Legislature until there's a clearer revenue picture.

But however hurried the session might be, Richardson is thinking that he can at least call for some ethics legislation — not just the good-government kind like the "Sunshine Portal" act that was passed allowing online publication of financial information, nor the two "whistle-blower" bills he's suddenly in a mood to sign, but creation of an ethics commission.

That would be an enormous waste of special-session time — and, probably, further fraud upon the people of New Mexico. Two of them considered during the regular session were toothless. One was so bad that Common Cause, the League of Women Voters and the Foundation for Open Government found themselves forced to oppose it.

If the governor and the Legislature are looking for an ethics legacy — and they certainly *should* be, given the behavior of so many — they should recall and pass the real ethics reform that made it through the House, then died in the Senate without a hearing: a bill banning political contributions from lobbyists and government contractors.

It would sound the death knell to the pay-to-play political culture that's been the ruin of many a promising public-service career. Think New Mexico, the activist public-policy group pushing for its passage, reminded the governor this week that the measure has the endorsement of all our state's living ex-governors, as well as the many good-government advocates who see the difference between this and phony ethics-commission proposals.

The governor should spare his state the spectacle of further ethics-commission debate — at least for now; there are too many legislators trying to sabotage the notion of a truly effective commission. But there might be enough honest senators to pass the ban on bribery, uh, campaign contributions with *quid pro quo*, if this measure were to get a hearing.

A legislative session limited to the budget and this one reform could pass it quickly — saving face and repairing the state's reputation.