



Title: **Could this be the year for capital reform?**
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Could this be the year for capital reform?

Buried inside nearly a thousand proposals introduced so far this legislative session is a measure that could dramatically reshape how New Mexico spends its money and takes care of its infrastructure.

If passed, Senate Bill 262 would water down politics and beef up the process by which shovel-ready public works projects get funded. It would bring significant reforms to how New Mexico distributes its capital funds for the upkeep of roads and bridges, water and other infrastructure projects, and in the construction of public facilities, including new schools, all over the state.

We're talking big money here — \$969.6 million as of this year, according to the bill's fiscal impact report.

If passed and signed into law, SB 262 will create a Public Works Legislative Interim Committee, with nine members appointed from the House and nine others from the Senate. Requests for capital funding would be considered based on need and merit, and the committee would create a list of recommended projects for funding, in keeping with a four-year capital improvement plan that will also be developed.

The process would be a dramatic improvement to New Mexico's current system of funding capital projects. What the state uses now is inefficient, ineffective and politically tainted.

"Imagine how chaotic and impractical it would be to build the state budget by dividing up the available dollars among all 112 legislators and asking them to individually pick what they want to fund, with minimal coordination," Fred Nathan, executive director of Think New Mexico, said in an email last week. "Yet that is how we currently spend our infra-

structure dollars."

He's talking about the Legislature's annual "Christmas Tree Bill," so called because there's something in it from everyone. Lawmakers submit their funding proposals based on constituent requests, then they huddle behind closed doors and decide which projects to fund, and how much to fund them. The process is secretive and skewed in favor of the more entrenched lawmakers, with the actual merit of the projects taking a backseat to pork-barrel politics.

Think New Mexico, a nonpartisan think tank with a record of legislative successes, has been working for a couple of years now to get a bill passed that would fix this dysfunctional process. Last year, House Bill 307 fell short, but this year, Nathan says, the "climate for capital outlay reform" has improved.

"There is widespread acknowledgement by legislators across the state that the current system is broken beyond repair, and New Mexico simply cannot afford to have \$969.6 million ... sitting on the sidelines at a time when we need all the job creation we can get," Nathan said.

And the fact that other bills have cropped up this session to fix one or more aspects of the capital outlay system shows "the growing appetite for reform," he said.

SB 262 appears to be gathering some bipartisan support. Sen. Joseph Cervantes, a Democrat out of Las Cruces, introduced the legislation and Rep. Kelly Fajardo, a Republican from Belen, signed on as its House sponsor. Co-sponsors include Sens. Carlos Cisneros, John Sapien and Bill Tallman, all Democrats.

Meanwhile, Gov. Susana Martinez has called for reforms to

the capital outlay system for two consecutive sessions now. In her State of the State address in January, she appealed to lawmakers for "greater transparency and efficiency to the capital outlay process." SB 262 would do exactly that.

As of this writing, the bill is awaiting consideration by the Senate Rules Committee, but don't expect it to languish there for long. Cervantes is pushing the bill not only as a reform measure but also as a job creator, since it would free up and start funneling a lot of money into construction projects around the state.

This could be a defining bill for this legislative session — a comprehensive reform measure that, if passed, will permanently change the way we fund, improve and maintain our infrastructure in New Mexico. It remains to be seen, however, whether lawmakers will place the merit of such reforms over their own political agendas and expediencies.

Tom McDonald is founder and editor of the New Mexico Community News Exchange and writes this column for newspapers around the state as part of the service. He is also editor of the Roswell Daily Record and can be reached there at tmcdonald@rdrnews.com or 575-622-7710, ext. 302. The views expressed in this column do not necessarily represent those of the Roswell Daily Record.



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