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State's worst, pork politics

from the Roswell Daily Record

ROSWELL — When it comes to pork-barrel politics, New Mexico is among the worst offenders. The state has a system of funding capital projects that's based on politics, not need, and that creates a colossal waste of money.

Earlier this month, the nonpartisan Think New Mexico released its latest report, "The Story of the Christmas Tree Bill: Fixing Public Infrastructure Spending in New Mexico," which highlights in great and well-researched detail why the state's infrastructure is crumbling. In fact, the state's infrastructure is among the worst in the nation, according to various sources cited in the report.

That has a negative effect on economic development, since businesses and industries depend on roads and bridges and other public infrastructure projects and citizens need flood control, drinking water and wastewater treatment to keep their community viable and healthy. New Mexico is slated to spend more than \$4 billion on its infrastructure over the next five years, and we're not getting much of a return on our investment.

The problem lies with our process for funding infrastructure improvements. Toward the end of each regular session, lawmakers pass a capital outlay bill, aka the Christmas Tree Bill, allocating millions of dollars to infrastructure projects. This year (in special session, since lawmakers couldn't reach an agreement during the regular session), \$295 million was doled out for 994 projects.

That averages out to \$296,781 per project, which is a big part of the problem. Many of the infrastructure projects in need of funding cost millions of dollars, so as lawmakers

divvy up the loot, few projects get full funding. Think New Mexico cited the Legislative Finance Committee's quarterly capital outlay update that shows 701 unfinished projects last year, though \$198.2 million was allocated to them. The state is restoring its infrastructure in bits and pieces — which often means the restorations aren't really happening.

That's akin to building half a house, but it allows lawmakers to bring home the bacon. It's also a contentious issue. According to Think New Mexico's report, there have been six special sessions called since 1996, mainly to pass capital outlay bills that couldn't make it through the regular session.

And that's the biggest problem with the state's approach to capital improvements. Politics, not practicality, rules the day. That's what the state needs to fix.

Think New Mexico's proposal is to create an independent capital outlay planning board — made up of professionals, not politicians — to develop a comprehensive plan "using a transparent, merit-based process that ranks projects" based on criteria developed by the lawmakers and the governor. Those rankings would then be introduced in a bill that would fully fund the projects in order of priority. The think tank's proposal would also empower the Legislature and the governor to "line-item veto" projects, but they wouldn't be able to add new projects; require a local match, based on a sliding scale, for local projects; and set a minimum size for capital projects funded by bonds.

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