



Title: **Good-government bill will be back**  
 Author: State columnist  
 Size: 40.61 square inch  
 Portales, NM Circulation: 2900

# Good-government bill will be back

One of the many bills to fall by the wayside in the just-past legislative session was House Bill 307, which would have reformed the way New Mexico funds its public works projects.

It was a good-government proposal. It would have served the public interest better than what's in place now. It would have replaced politics with a smarter approach to spending taxpayer money and taking care of the state's infrastructure.

It's a shame this bill didn't even get out of committee, but it'll be back next year — probably with an even better chance at passage.

It all started with Think New Mexico's report last year on the problems inherent with the state's approach to capital spending. Since 1977, lawmakers have gotten together and passed an annual "Christmas Tree Bill" — so called because there's something in it for every lawmaker's district. Or they don't pass it; over the past two decades, capital outlay bills have failed six times because of partisan fighting. The current process is as politically tainted as they come.



**Tom McDonald**  
 ♦  
 State columnist

HB 307 would have changed that by pulling at least some of the politics out of the process. As it is now, toward the end of each session lawmakers huddle up behind closed doors and decide which capital requests to fund, and how much. The process is secretive and skewed in favor of the more entrenched and powerful lawmakers. The actual relevance of the project proposals takes a back seat to lawmakers who are the most adept at bringing home the bacon.

That may be good politics, but it's not good government. If you want your tax dollars spent according to need rather than political pull, the process needs to be changed.

HB 307 would have reduced the political influences and created a more systematic, need-based approach to capital funding.

Specifically, the bill would

have created a "capital project planning council" and a "capital planning and assistance division" that would prioritize projects and prepare a statewide capital improvements plan with annual updates. The bill would also have created a "capital outlay oversight committee" for lawmakers. In short, a council of qualified professionals would select the individual projects while lawmakers would vote on the overall appropriation.

So why did this good-government proposal fall in committee? According to reports, when it came up in the House Government, Election and Indian Affairs Committee, lawmakers from rural areas objected. They were concerned that their pet projects would get the short end of the stick and they'd lose out on funding.

As is so often the case, it takes a while to pass good-government legislation, and this was only the first push for Think New Mexico's proposal. Executive Director Fred Nathan is already looking to the next session — as well he should, since the groundwork has been laid, the proposal gathered a lot of support and,

next time, there will be more time to work it through the legislature.

"This was a humbling process for us," Nathan said in an email to me last week, "but we received excellent feedback and we are encouraged that HB 307 was the only bill this session that had the backing of both major labor and business organizations, which lays a solid foundation for next year.

"We will continue to emphasize how many well-paying construction jobs these reforms would create, particularly in the rural parts of the state where the need for public infrastructure projects is greatest."

Obviously, he's already trying to get the rural support he needs to pass it next year. That's good, because New Mexico could really use some good government these days.

**Tom McDonald is editor of the New Mexico Community News Exchange. Contact him at:**

**tmcdonald@gazette mediaservices.com**