



Dispatch New Mexico

Backward NM might someday move forward

By Tom McDonald

It's easy to talk about how backward New Mexico is. I'm not sure if out-of-staters do it, but we New Mexicans sure like to talk our state down. You know you do. I do too.

But we're not as backward as we might think. We're more diverse, culturally and ethnically, than most states in the Union, which makes us a lot more tolerant of differences. At least it seems that way to me, a Southern transplant who has seen enough homogeneity to know *that* is what makes a place backward.

We New Mexicans even have our own think tanks, my favorite being Think New Mexico.

It's a nonpartisan think tank (as if you can actually be a bona fide think tank

with partisan leanings). The fact that Democrats and Republicans alike have objected to, and embraced, Think New Mexico's ideas and proposals over the years is evidence this group rises above party politics — sort of.

I say that because Think does more than create studies and write reports on its findings. It also proposes specific legislation and lobbies lawmakers and the governor's office for its passage. Fred Nathan, founder and executive director, has been doing pushing pragmatic solutions for years — and he and his team will be back at it during this year's legislative session.

This year, Think is proposing a big shift of tax dollars from school administration to school principals and the class-

rooms they oversee — a \$100 million move that would place more money where it should be: in classroom instruction.

It's a lofty proposal, perhaps too much for a 30-day session — although, the session is intended to be budget focused and this is definitely a budgetary matter. But with this being a highly charged election year, and a lame-duck year for Gov. Susana Martinez, I'm not optimistic. I seldom am these days when it comes to substantive bills in the New Mexico Legislature ... but there I go, running down our state like everybody else does.

But back to my favorite think tank. Over the years, Think New Mexico has published 16 policy reports and had some heady accomplishments along the way.

The group has had a real impact on New Mexicans' lives in the areas of education, taxes, water and a lot more. Credit Think New Mexico for its role in getting the sales tax removed from food purchases; getting full-day kindergarten in place across the entire state and more money into pre-K programs; keeping students' lottery scholarships solvent; making it easier to do business in and with the state; and more.

Unfortunately, the group can't always get it done. In 2015, Think released a report on the state's antiquated process for infrastructure spending around the state. It recommended significant revisions to the process that would lessen the political influences over infrastructure funding and

create a more merit-based, problem-solving approach to spending money on needed projects. So far, Think has not been able to get any such measure passed.

No surprise, really, because it cuts at the heart of pork-barrel politics in our state, where all lawmakers get to take home a little bacon each year, thanks to our inadequate approach to capital outlay spending.

Part of the problem I think has been an ineffectual governor when it comes to getting bold new laws through the legislature. That's something Martinez has never been good at as governor. She has expressed her support for capital reforms but as far as I can tell she's convinced no one of anything. Instead, the effort has stalled in the last two

sessions, and probably won't go anywhere this session either.

But this is where I'm reminded of a "backward" story from my childhood years in Arkansas. During the 1960s and early '70s, Arkansas politics was controlled by the Democratic Party, but Republican candidate Winthrop Rockefeller won election as governor.

He came in as a reformer and set out to take on the big issues of the state, but the Democratic legislature wouldn't go along. They refused to fund studies and blue-ribbon taskforces he proposed to address issues like education and economic development.

Rockefeller, being a wealthy man, funded some of the studies out of his own pocket, and when his blue-ribbon bodies

proposed things like free textbooks for high school students, the proposals hit nothing but brick walls in the state legislature.

Then came Gov. Dale Bumpers, a Democrat, who took those same recommendations and easily pushed them through the legislature for approval because, well, he was of the same party.

That's petty politics. But that's politics. Maybe, more than anything else, that's what keeps us moving backward.

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