



## Dispatch New Mexico

# Food-tax proposal is outrageously regressive

By Tom McDonald

The bearded wonder is at it again.

I'm talking about Cliff Pirtle, the state senator from Roswell who, in 2012, defeated Tim Jennings, the Senate's pro temp who had enjoyed more than three decades in office before Gov. Susana Martinez threw some heavy hitting support behind Pirtle. He's been serving in District 32 ever since, winning notoriety for his efforts to rid the state of daylight saving time.

He hasn't succeeded at getting the time measure passed yet, a bill I'm inclined to agree with. I do, however, hope his food-tax bill will be soundly defeated.

I call Pirtle "bearded" because of the long facial hair he's grown out, giving him a clearly distinctive look among lawmakers. I call him "wonder" because I can't help but wonder if he cares about poor people in any sort of constructive way.

Senate Bill 129, which Pirtle is sponsoring, would place a sales tax back on

certain "unhealthy" groceries — items that aren't covered by the federal Women Infants Children, or WIC, nutrition program. You may recall that New Mexico lifted the sales tax off groceries in 2004, thereby rescinding a regressive tax on a basic necessity of life.

Think about it: A \$250 groceries purchase might seem like a million dollars to a family living under the federal poverty level (under \$30,750 for a family of four), but to a millionaire it's just spare change. Yet they both get taxed the same, which obviously hits lower-income people the hardest. That makes it a "regressive" tax.

If you think this is a purely partisan issue, think again. Since the food tax was lifted in 2004, both Democrats and Republicans have proposed its reinstatement, at least in part, at least four times. The hypocrisy runs deep when it comes to political ideologies, as the "anti-tax" GOP and the "pro-working class" Dems

have each taken a stab at such repeals.

Ideologies be damned, it's all about selfish interests. Pirtle, a dairy farmer, represents a conservative agricultural district, one with little sympathy for New Mexicans who struggle from paycheck to paycheck. Make them carry their own weight, they seem to be saying — especially if their "weight" is due to poor eating habits.

In my outraged opinion, this bill is anti-poverty legislation. Strike that. It's anti families-in-poverty legislation. It targets them specifically.

Of course, that's not the argument in support of SB 129. Proponents contend this bill would help poor folks because it'll encourage them to make healthier choices.

The libertarian side of me bristles at such an argument. How dare our government tell poor people — and everybody else, for that matter, because we'll all have to pay the tax — what we should or

shouldn't purchase! Whatever happened to our free enterprise economic system?

Moreover, it's doublespeak to say we'll be helping poor people by taxing them more. Here we have Big Brother taking yet another step toward taking over our everyday lives.

Let's get real. People aren't poor because of their eating habits. They're poor because they don't have money. And now you want to take more money from them? Sounds like a recipe for more people living in poverty, not fewer.

As for those who aren't struggling in the lower-income brackets, here's a question for you: Do you really trust the state to govern your own eating habits? I know I don't.

I'm a carnivore, but I recognize that vegans have a point about the unhealthy side effects of my meat-eating ways. And yet meat would still be exempt from the food tax. Is that really health-focused legislation?

I don't want the state to punish me for consuming red meat. My doctor can lecture me about that, but I draw the line when Santa Fe starts messing with my plate of food.

And here's one more question worth asking our lawmakers: Why impose a new tax now, when our state revenue coffers are fattening back up? The state doesn't need the money, and if you're worrying about future revenue downturns (which you should be), why not consider options that aren't tied to a necessity for survival?

Gov. Martinez should also oppose SB 129, since she has spent her two terms fighting back one tax proposal after another with her fiscally conservative ideology.

If this bill passes the legislative session, we'll see whether she'll stand on her anti-tax principles and veto it or, by signing it, join the ranks of the political hypocrites.