

New Mexico Think Tank's Next Mission: Restoring Public Trust By Killing 'Pay for Play'

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HERALD Reporter

Think New Mexico's latest charge: "Restoring Trust: Banning Political Contributions from Contractors & Lobbyists."

If it sounds like this issue was ripped right out of the headlines, it was – modern and historic.

The fall 2009 report by Think New Mexico, "A Results-Oriented Think Tank Serving New Mexicans," notes that "pay for play" dates back to at least the Lincoln County War (1878-'81).

Think New Mexico notes that war "began as a political fight over the control of government contracts for beef and other provisions. Those government contracts were heavily influenced by the patronage of the powerful "Santa Fe Ring," a group of lawyers, judges, businessmen and politicians from both parties who gained control of the territorial legislature and courts, and dominated the economic life of New Mexico by manipulating public offices for private gain."

Territorial New Mexico's sordid political reputation is blamed in part for delaying statehood until 1912.

Eventually, President Theodore Roosevelt's intervened, firing a pair of territorial governors and naming one of his former Rough Rider officers, George Curry, governor in 1907.

"All I ask of you is that you give an absolutely honest and common-sense administration..." Roosevelt wrote in a letter to Curry. [Your predecessor] plunge[d] the affairs of the Territory into such a tangle that I am quite at a loss to know how to discriminate between those who are decent

and those who are not. I look to you to help me out."

Fast forward to modern-day headlines like, "Former Treasurer Michael Montoya Sentenced," "Four Indicted in Courthouse Conspiracy," "Vigil-Giron Accused of Embezzlement, Money Laundering Scheme," and "PRC Member Indicted."

A stronger court system and the prevalence of media watchdogs has done much to bring New Mexico out of the dark territorial days, but as recent headlines indicate, much more is needed.

"Banning political contributions from lobbyists and those with a financial interest in legislation will reduce corruption and enhance public trust in government," Think New Mexico asserts in an Oct. 11 media alert.

"Think New Mexico urges the legislature and Gov. Richardson to enact legislation prohibiting government contractors, anyone seeking major government subsidies and lobbyists from making or bundling political contributions to state or local elected officials.

"The proposals build on New Mexico's Gift Act, which passed the legislature by a strong bipartisan majority and was signed into law by Gov. Richardson in 2007. The Gift Act prohibits state contractors, recipients of major government subsidies and registered lobbyists from making gifts worth more than \$250 to state candidates or public officials.

"As the report states: 'The enactment of the Gift Act begs the question: if we believe that these three groups should not give gifts worth more than \$250, why should they be able to make cam-

aign contributions worth as much as \$4,600 in a single election cycle?'

"Seven other states have enacted laws banning political contributions from government contractors and lobbyists, and elected officials in those states have found that the reforms have improved the political cultures of their states..."

"Implementing these reforms is urgent," Think New Mexico argues, "because a recent series of scandals involving contractors and lobbyists has undermined public trust in government at a time when state and local governments face serious challenges that will require public confidence and support to solve. In addition, every dollar spent on a contractor or subsidy that is awarded based on politics, rather than on the merits, is a dollar that is not available for important public services.

"Think New Mexico is calling on the Legislature and Gov. Richardson to enact these reforms in the upcoming 2010 legislative session. Specifically, Think New Mexico is championing a bill that will prohibit government contractors, recipients of major government subsidies, and registered lobbyists from either donating directly or bundling political contributions from other donors and delivering them to the candidates who might influence decisions about whether to award them public dollars. The legislation would apply those prohibitions to local governments, such as municipalities, counties and school boards, as well as those at the state level."

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