

Guv: Legislators can discuss police reform, election changes during special session

Written by By Matthew Reichbach The NM Political Report
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This week's special session will, as expected, include more than just budget matters, the governor's office announced June 18.

While the state must address plunging revenues, which would result in an unbalanced budget, something that is not allowed according to the state constitution, Gov. Michelle Lujan Grisham also said that non-budget items would include police reform efforts, election changes and tax relief for small businesses.

The special session is necessary because of the economic impact of COVID-19 and the restrictions put in place to slow the spread of the disease.

Only legislation that is put on the call can be passed during special sessions.

Some legislators have said they should only address budget issues during the special session and that other issues can wait until the regular legislative session in January.

The issue of police reform has become a front-line issue in recent weeks, after the killing of George Floyd in Minnesota. A police officer, since fired, was charged with murder, and three others with aiding and abetting the killing of George Floyd.

The legislative proposals that Lujan Grisham said will be on the call are statewide bans on chokehold restraints by police, making police disciplinary history public records and mandating that police officers wear body cameras.

Lujan Grisham said that this would be the start and that more would be taken up during the regular session in January.

"This is not the end of the reform work we must take up — on public safety and racial injustice

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or on budgetary matters,” Lujan Grisham said. “The focus of this special session is relatively narrow given the economic crisis and the public health concerns about gathering for an extended period of time — but we must begin to address both the financial and human rights emergencies of this moment and put ourselves in a position to evaluate and enact broader structural reform in the next regular session of the Legislature.”

House Republicans criticized the governor and said they hadn’t seen copies of legislation they would be asked to vote on.

“None of this has been made public until noon today (June 18) — we are expected to be taking up election law changes, setting up commissions to study qualified immunity, and the list goes on and on — all without draft legislation for review,” House Minority Leader Jim Townsend, R-Artesia, said. “Focusing our efforts on anything other than our budget and our economic crisis is unacceptable. The people of New Mexico deserve better.”

The release by the House Republicans said it was a lack of transparency on the part of the governor and Democrats.

As for election reform, the governor will ask the legislature to pass legislation that would allow county clerks to send ballots to registered voters with a current mailing address. County clerks sent absentee ballot applications to every eligible voter in June’s primaries, though some complained of delays and some arrived after Election Day — only absentee ballots that are returned by the close of polls can be counted.

Additionally, the governor will ask legislators to waive penalties and interest for small businesses and individuals who were not able to make property tax or gross receipts tax payments because of the COVID-19 pandemic.

In an effort to aid local governments, she will also allow legislation to invest portions of the state’s Severance Tax Permanent Fund for long-term, low-interest loans to municipalities and small businesses impacted by COVID-19.

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The governor will also allow legislation to permit liquor delivery during a public health emergency or pandemic, along with electronic notary services.

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