

Legislature should strengthen, sustain a healthy democracy during the pandemic

Written by Lilly Irvin-Vitela, New Mexicans for Ethics Coalition Kathleen Sabo, Ethics Watch Sydney Tellez, Common Cause
Friday, 26 June 2020 07:39

Now, more than ever, New Mexicans count on our citizen legislature to fulfill the public trust by approaching the June 18 Special Session with transparency, inclusion, and equity.

On May 8, the New Mexicans for Ethics Coalition, a member organization, and 30 additional organizations aligned to share an open letter to legislators http://nmfirst.org/legislative_updates/special-session-letter to suggest ways to strengthen and sustain a health democracy. Volunteer legislators face unprecedented challenges in the midst of a pandemic which has created both a public health and economic crisis. In order to avoid a public policy crisis, concerned New Mexicans offered the following suggestions to ensure community voices in policy decision-making and trust in public institutions.

During the Special Session, New Mexicans reasonably expect clear and predictable ways to participate in hearings and deliberations and the signees offered the following recommendations to strengthen transparency, inclusion, and considerations of equity while making difficult financial decisions:

All hearings and deliberations should remain public and abide by the U.S. Constitution, New Mexico Constitution, Open Meetings Act, and House and Senate Rules.

We also ask that communication options are inclusive and entail analog and digital options to provide the greatest access possible to the legislative process.

All hearings and deliberation schedules should be announced in advance and should not be changed without notice, since unexpected changes suppress opportunities for transparency and meaningful public participation.

All hearings and deliberations should continue to be broadcast and allow remote opportunities for public comment with clear and complete written guidance, published public engagement processes, ADA accessible options, and technical assistance capacity to navigate remote session and or social distancing requirements before the Special Session is convened.

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We request that all hearings, deliberations, and votes are made between 8 am and 8 pm to avoid real or perceived suppression of transparency and public engagement.

We suggest avoiding a caucus of either party during scheduled hearings or deliberations to avoid creating issues with quorum, interfering with transparent and inclusive involvement from communities.

All hearings and deliberations must maintain quorum and the reason(s) for loss of quorum must be posted on the nmlegis.gov website for public review.

To date, we have received no response from legislative leadership as to the processes that will be employed to ensure public participation, notice and access to hearings and proposed legislation and budgets. We know the planning around an in-person session is intricate and demanding, but the public cannot be left in the dark as the session approaches.

Those trying their best to make a Special Session work under trying and unprecedented circumstances are bound by the trust placed in them by citizens to include public participation, notice and access within the priorities of planning. To do otherwise may move the special session forward, but at the expense of leaving democracy behind.

By Lilly Irvin-Vitela,

New Mexicans for Ethics Coalition
Kathleen Sabo,
Ethics Watch
Sydney Tellez,
Common Cause