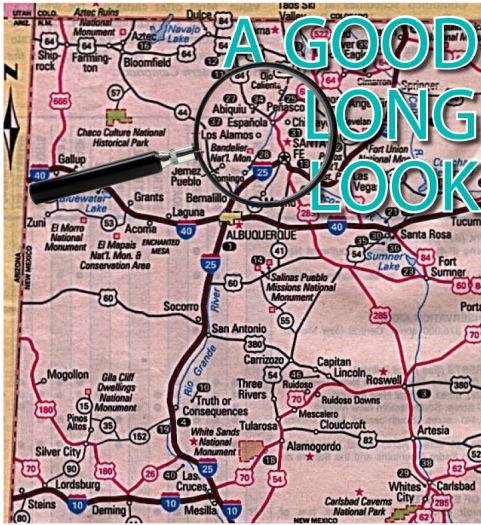


Legislative Finance Committee tackles major issues

Written by By Beth Blakeman Associate Editor

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A group of New Mexico legislators has gathered in Cloudcroft — once rated as one of the nation's most overlooked and underrated destination spots — to help fashion New Mexico's path through the global pandemic.

Three days of meetings that started July 15 at Cloudcroft High School could direct the course of some vital affairs in the state, including how the economy is reopened and how schools and college campuses come alive.

"New Mexico's economic future could well be determine[d] by the testimony to be presented at this week's LFC [Legislative Finance Committee] meetings. I have served on the LFC for years and I feel these are the most critical hearings I will ever participate in," Sen. Steven Neville, R-Farmington, said. "It is a desperate time in our state and we are desperate to find answers and solutions on how to reopen our state's economy, how to reopen our schools next month and how our college campuses will operate and educate students under COVID restrictions."

He was joined by another member of the LFC in his intense interest in the meetings.

"The presenters at this week's LFC meetings make some of the most imperative testimony we will ever hear as members of the interim committee," Sen. Bill Burt, R-Alamogordo said. "We are working diligently to find answers and solutions in how to get back our economy and our lives back to normal under these restrictive health orders."

David Abbey director of the LFC, told the *Gallup Sun*, "There's a lot of anxiety and worry about our economic prospects. Statewide we lost over 100K jobs and got about 20K back ... Some of the jobs may never come back.

"Members expressed some concern about the slow pace of reopening ... We've also got to try to keep things [that are] open as safe as possible."

The opening day of the meetings in Cloudcroft featured a presentation by State Auditor Brian Colón, who told the *Sun* that the COVID-19 pandemic brought with it a need for best practices, oversight, streamlining and risk assessment against a wave of new types of fraud that emerged

after the arrival of the COVID-19 virus.

Colón described one of those as a telephone call that promises to get people who are waiting, to the front of the unemployment benefits line — for a fee.

He said there are plenty of spoofs and efforts to relieve people, and the state treasury, of their money by promising counterfeit goods and services.

Cyber security and exposure to ransom ware are among the risks cropping up as people found themselves staying home more during the pandemic and receiving more email.

Another trick to be wary of, he warned, is one in which a vendor says there has been a change of their company's mailing address and requests payment at a new address.

Colón said he encourages the two-step security process when using online bank accounts and for other online activities.

The state auditor heads up a working group known as The COVID-19 Funding Accountability Group. Focused on risks to the public in this difficult time, the group is made up of representatives from the N.M. state procurement office, the general services division, the department of finance, the legislative finance committee, the public education department, and just recently, the state department of health has been invited to join.

The LFC and Colón's office, the OSA, issued their first joint risk advisory June 16 to advance best practices.

The two-page bulletin focuses on mitigating risk in securing emergency procurements such as masks, gowns, and ventilators.

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It concentrates on the use of statewide price agreements and shopping around to prevent price gouging. Also included in the advisory are recommendations about investigating unfamiliar vendors, avoiding prepayment and abiding by transparency laws.

Colón encouraged preventative education in addition to oversight.

In the joint advisory, he pointed out that communities can report governmental waste, fraud, or abuse anonymously at (866) OSA-FRAUD or at saonm.org.

Callers can also speak to an investigator at (505) 476-3800.

Fraudulent vendors can be reported at Mark.Hayden@state.nm.us or by calling (505) 827-0472.

Other speakers at the meeting included guest presenters from Virgin Galactic Initiatives at Spaceport, N.M. and for Permian Basin drilling and production.

Abbey said oil and gas represent about half the state's revenues. While they have come back "maybe," he says there is still a huge downside risk.

"If we don't keep drilling, we're going to lose production on a long term basis," he added.

He said the spotlight on the second day of the meeting would include education with Secretary of Education Ryan Stewart speaking by phone.

Abbey's concern is that while most classes will be conducted virtually for the first weeks of school, the distance learning is not going to be as effective as in-person learning.

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The meetings will also tackle prison population classification. Abbey said inmates are classified using a system of six levels of security, and most of the inmates are at level three. He said if the state is over-classifying, it costs tens of millions of dollars.

In a typical year, the LFC meets once a month in different communities around the state for between two and four days all summer long. This year, because of the novel coronavirus, the meeting in Cloudcroft will be the last one held outside Santa Fe. The next meeting is scheduled for about a month from now.

Beginning Sept. 1, every agency will submit a request and presentation about budget needs, so the LFC can begin development of a budget for Fiscal Year 2022.

Abbey said he has great confidence in this group of lawmakers.

“They know what the needs are.”

He added that they work together in a bipartisan fashion.

By Beth Blakeman
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