

Governor gets out her pen

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Bill signing is under way in Santa Fe

In the last few days, Governor Michelle Lujan Grisham has signed bills into law in quick succession.

A bipartisan measure providing more funding for New Mexico firefighters that will help departments across the state purchase essential equipment, including water tanks and firetrucks, was signed April 7. Senate Bill 256, sponsored by Sen. William Burt, R-Alamogordo, and Rep. Gail Armstrong, R-Magdalena, passed both chambers with unanimous support.

Senate Bill 93, which advances broadband connection and development received the governor's signature April 7. It establishes an Office of Broadband Access and Expansion to centralize and coordinate broadband activities across state governmental agencies, local governmental bodies, tribal governmental organizations and internet service providers.

It was paired with House Bill 10, which establishes the Connect New Mexico Fund and the Connect New Mexico Council which will provide state grant funding for broadband infrastructure statewide and conduct and enact oversight and accountability requirements; the legislation also significantly increases the annual distribution for broadband infrastructure from the State Rural Universal Service Fund.

April 7 was an important date for two other pieces of legislation: Senate Bill 1 from the special session in March is an economic development measure that allows 50 percent of state and local gross receipts taxes and compensating revenues from construction phases of projects (more than \$350 million) to be placed into the Local Economic Development Act fund to help that

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business with land, building and infrastructure costs.

“This new initiative will give us another important tool to create higher-paying jobs and diversify the economy,” Lujan Grisham said.

Another major bill signed into law that day was the New Mexico Civil Rights Act. It allows a person to litigate any deprivation of the rights, privileges and immunities provided for in the bill of rights of the state constitution. It also prohibits the use of qualified immunity as a defense for depriving a person of those constitutionally guaranteed civil rights.

It is notable, however, that a Senate amendment prevents claims from incidents prior to July 1, 2021 — the effective date of the new law — may not be considered and a public body’s liability for damages under the state Civil Rights Act is capped at \$2 million.

Working class New Mexico families stand to benefit immensely from the landmark expansions of two tax programs authorized April 6. House Bill 29 expands the Low-Income Comprehensive Tax Rebate, or LICTR, and the Working Families Tax Credit, making more New Mexicans eligible for the benefits and increasing the benefits they will receive.

The new law expands the Working Families Tax Credit to taxpayers without Social Security numbers and to taxpayers as young as 18 years old and also increases the value of the credit. For the 2021 and 2022 tax years, the Working Families Tax Credit will be worth 20 percent of the federal Earned Income Tax Credit, or EITC; it had previously been worth 17 percent of the EITC. Beginning in 2023, it will be worth 25 percent of the EITC.

The Low-Income Comprehensive Tax Rebate, or LICTR, under the new law will now be worth up to \$730, depending on income and family size, up from a maximum of \$450 previously.

The new law also expands the income level for LICTR eligibility from \$22,000 to \$36,000. The law also includes a provision indexing the rebate to inflation, so that its value does not erode over time, as it had, significantly, over the past 20 years.

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“We know these programs are among the most effective anti-poverty efforts we have. Expanding them means we can lift more families out of poverty and strengthen the safety net for the most vulnerable people in our community,” the governor said.

An important bill for people in McKinley County is House Bill 6 which addresses the public school funding formula. This bill ends credits for Impact Aid payments, providing school districts with federally impacted land access to more than \$60 million to better serve students, including many Native Americans.

“This bill removes a systemic inequity in the way we fund New Mexico public schools that has resulted in huge disparities between have and have-not districts,” Public Education Secretary Ryan Stewart said.

Indian Affairs Secretary Lynn Trujillo also had praise for the new law.

“Today (April 5) marks a turning point for Indian education in New Mexico,” Trujillo said. “This historic change will ensure that school districts serving Native American students see an increase in funding by allowing districts to keep the federal Impact Aid funds generated by Native students.

“This legislation is another landmark investment by this administration to rebuild Indian education in our state,” she stated.

Monday was also the day Lujan Grisham signed a bill banning discrimination based on hair or cultural or religious headdress, as well as the day she put her pen to a bipartisan measure to deliver more child support for families in need, enacted a Family Income Index and created a new office to advocate for the educational rights of students seeking special education services.

The governor has 20 days after the end of the legislative session to act on any bills that have been sent to her desk. That date is April 9.

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