

The money train is coming to Gallup

Written by By Molly Ann Howell Sun Correspondent
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In the form of capital outlay

Money makes the world go around, as the old saying goes – and as the second session of the 55th New Mexico Legislature ended – money was on the minds of local legislators.

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They are now back to explain how the money will be spent. The session began on Jan. 18 and ended Feb. 17.

“These 30-day sessions are fast and furious and they’re all about budget,” Rep. Patricia Lundstrom, D-Gallup, explained during the Feb. 22 Gallup City Council meeting. “At the end of the day the only reason we should be there based on the Constitution is the general appropriation act.”

As Lundstrom said, budget concerns were the focus of the legislative session. Brandon Howe, a planner with the Northwest New Mexico Council of Governments, told the council which projects the NNMCOG had on tap.

The NNMCOG submitted nine local projects for capital outlay funding. Lundstrom said McKinley County received about \$16 million in capital outlay. Capital outlay funds are used to build, improve, or equip physical property that will be used by the public.

Howe first told the council that the city did not receive any direct capital outlay funding for the water well construction project. Still, it did receive \$8 million from the general appropriations bill.

The General Appropriations Act (House Bill 2) includes education, public safety, and infrastructure funding.

Next on Howe’s list was the east Nizhoni Boulevard improvements.

“We weren’t able to secure any funding for that project, but we do have a couple of applications in the works, so we have a plan of attack and a strategy to get that budget funded,” Howe said.

According to the city’s website, the project will consist of three phases. Phase 1 includes East Nizhoni Boulevard and Second Street. This phase will reconfigure the intersection and relocate turn signals and traffic lights.

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Phase 2 will include the East Nizhoni Boulevard and College Drive intersection. The improvements will include adding more lanes, new turn lanes, and relocating traffic lights.

Phase 3 will see the addition of new curbs and gutters and getting the sidewalks up to code with the ADA guidelines.

According to the city's website, the project will cost over \$3.7 million.

Meanwhile, the state did not fund direct capital outlay for the new senior living center, but Howe said the project was listed in the general obligation bond bill. General obligation bonds are repaid through property taxes and voted on during elections.

Howe said the general obligation bill should cover about \$5.4 million of the new senior living center cost. In a previous interview with the *Sun*, Mayor Louie Bonaguidi said the new center would cost as much as \$7 million.

Additionally, Howe explained that the general obligation bond applications are starting back up again, and that the NWNMCOG would be working with the city staff to put together an application to get the remaining funding needed.

Another project that the city needs funding for is the re-turfing of parks and sports fields.

"We've secured \$350,000 from the legislators [for the turf]," Howe said. "One of the things we've talked about before this is kind of leveraging those funds with the land and water conservation fund and hopefully securing an additional \$250,000 to complete more replacements of the turfs."

Howe told the council that the regional animal shelter project could get \$150,000 from capital

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outlay once the governor signs off on it. West Aztec Avenue storm drainage improvements received \$100,000 in capital outlay, and the Gallup Cultural Center received \$175,000. The Gallup Police Department will be getting \$95,000 to purchase police vehicles.

Next, Howe then turned to the junior funding requests.

Adventure Gallup and Beyond is going to receive \$105,000 to develop an outdoor recreation plan. The money will also be used to implement their strategic plan.

In a previous city council meeting back in September, AGB said the recreation area would be on the north side of Gallup. It would cover the land east of the Gallup Flea Market and west of the Gallup Off-Highway Vehicle Park.

The McKinley County Domestic Violence Shelter for Battered Families will receive \$60,000 in operational funds, and the Four Corners Detox Center will be getting \$2 million to help construct their new building.

Before he concluded his presentation, Howe warned that all of these aforementioned entities may not be receiving the amounts listed.

“Of course, the governor still needs to review and approve the bill, so some of these might get [struck] out,” Howe said.

After Howe’s presentation, Lundstrom took over describing the important aspects of the legislative session to the council.

One thing she highlighted was the money that would be going towards economic development.

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For example, Gallup is slated to receive \$400,000 from the state to help plan and develop the 100th Annual Gallup Inter-Tribal Indian Ceremonial, which takes place Aug. 4-14.

The city will also be getting \$300,000 for Red Rock Park expenditures. Although this money will not be coming from capital outlay funds, but rather from the New Mexico Economic Development Department.

Lundstrom expressed enthusiasm that the U.S. Department of Transportation will spend \$25 million for the rural infrastructure accelerator grant program. The grant program is an effort to promote rural communities and any infrastructure projects they may have regarding transportation.

“This came out of this community as a result of [the city’s] autonomous vehicle work,” Lundstrom said.

Lundstrom said the city has been a leader in the autonomous vehicle frontier. She credited the Deputy Director of the Gallup Economic Development Corporation, Michael Sage, for pushing for a center in Gallup where the vehicles could be tested.

In a previous city council meeting, Sage explained why Gallup would be a great location for the autonomous vehicle testing, pointing out its proximity to Interstate 40 and the railroads.

Another bill that Lundstrom wanted the council to take note of was House Bill 163, which retains the Hold Harmless tax exemption. To explain, Hold Harmless is a tax bill that includes a child income tax credit. It also eliminates a tax on social security benefits, exempts military retirement income from state income tax, and stops taxes on food.

Gallup’s City Manager Maryann Ustick showed her support for HB 163.

“When I heard that the Hold Harmless bill passed, I didn’t know what to say or do because we

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have been fighting for that since the day I walked in the door,” Ustick said. “Mark Fleisher took everything that we talked about, planned, and strategized over the seven or eight years and he put it all in one bill and he got it done. It’s the most amazing thing I have ever seen.”

Mayor Louis Bonaguidi concluded the meeting by saying some encouraging words about how far Gallup has come in recent years.

“Over the last 30 years we’ve lost Fort Wingate, we’ve lost coal companies, we’ve lost more and more and more,” Bonaguidi said. “We’ve hit rock bottom, so I think at this point we’re going to be going up, and I think this is the first year basically we were successful.”

He declared that the legislative session had a very positive outlook for Gallup.

“We’ve been damn successful and now all we need is the governor to sign off on it,” Bonaguidi said. “I think the next few years are definitely going to be successful.”

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