Written by By Susan Boe President, New Mexico Foundation for Open Government
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The COVID-19 crisis has shown how quickly life can change. But it also has shown how much we need one another, that we are a community, looking out for one another, taking care of one another and being responsible for and to one another.

Because of that commitment to our neighbors, we had to shut down the economy, an action which has reverberated down Main Street, hurting us both personally and as a state. New Mexico now faces an unprecedented budget shortfall of up to $2 billion which will require the governor to call a special session of the legislature to address the deficit.

Extremely difficult decisions will face our lawmakers. Less than three months ago they returned to their home districts after making major investments in education, economic development and other areas while also creating the largest reserve balance in state history. Now draconian cuts will need to be made, which will directly impact every New Mexican.

How will the legislature make those decisions? Let’s hope it will be made in the open and not behind closed doors.

Historically, the creation of the state budget has been shrouded in secrecy. Both the House Appropriations and Finance Committee and the Senate Finance Committee routinely shut out the public and the press. Even lawmakers who are not budget committee members are left in the dark about how budget decisions are made. Yet those excluded lawmakers are expected to approve the final budget without asking questions or knowing all the facts.

The New Mexico Foundation for Open Government has long pushed the legislature for more transparency in the budget-making process. Not only is this the right thing to do, it is the legal thing to do. FOG’s position is that under the section of the Open Meetings Act directed at the

legislature, all committee meetings should be open to the public. Unfortunately, our advice and admonishments have been ignored.

A crisis can create an opportunity to try new solutions, especially when the old solutions no longer work. This upcoming special session is such an opportunity where the legislature can overturn the culture of secrecy in the budget building process.

In this time of social distancing, the legislature will need to be particularly sensitive and creative in how to engage the public in reshaping the state's financial future. A perfunctory special session may seem like an attractive option - difficult budget cuts would already have been made, and the full House and Senate would simply need to rubber stamp the outcome, with no public debate.

However, a state's budget is not like the Ten Commandments, which can be miraculously handed down as a done deal. Further, a budget made behind closed doors, with input only from lobbyists and special interest groups, does not make our state stronger. The opposite is true. Secrecy undermines our confidence in the state's leaders and weakens our community bonds. Because all New Mexicans will be asked to sacrifice for the common good, we can at least expect to see how elected officials struggle with choices between equally important but competing needs. Only in that way, can we feel confident that thoughtful decisions were made with our money.

New Mexicans are in this crisis together. Now is the time for lawmakers to open the Roundhouse windows and bring in the sunlight.

By Susan Boe
President, New Mexico Foundation for Open Government