

Reflection on New Mexico's Fifty-Second Legislature

Written by Rep. Patricia Lundstrom, D-Gallup Guest Column
Thursday, 30 April 2015 11:12



The 2015 Legislative Session started on January 20th at noon and ended at noon on March 31st. This session marks my 25th session as a member of the House, including regular, special and extraordinary sessions. My standing committees for each of those sessions are the House Appropriations and Finance Committee and the House Transportation and Public Works Committee.

Each Session starts about the same way, the legislators living outside of the Santa Fe area move to Santa Fe a day or two before the session starts, bright eyed and anxious for the session to start. It is not unlike children going back to school after a long summer. You can feel the excitement among the hotel staff and capitol staff, thinking "they're back." I admit I am one of those legislators that look forward to going back to session wearing my game face.

It is almost robotic, we know we have a job to do and for those returning legislators who have been meeting all summer on important issues we want only to put ideas into bill form and get the process started. You can see the hustle bustle in Legislative Council Service offices with all the legislators standing in line and meeting with drafters to get their most important idea drafted. For a group of people that don't receive any salary, experience tremendous personal sacrifice, and in some cases faced brutal elections, you would wonder why they are so excited to jump in ... visualize a rugby scrum.

Legislators in most cases, recognize they have a social contract with the people they represent. After all, we asked for the honor of holding this job. Ultimately, it is rewarding at a heart level to do the people's work. For me it is also important to be effective with all the things I work on and to help my constituents understand that I have their best interest in mind while juggling the needs of the state as a whole.

As I was packing for 60 days, I thought about how this upcoming session would be different for me as a senior legislator, soon to be governed by a different party affiliation other than my own. I wasn't concerned about my working relationship with the senior members of the opposite party

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because for the most part after 15 years of service I have become good friends with them and we can agree to disagree without issue. I was more apprehensive about the newly elected Republicans and Democrats, influenced by super PACs and pretending they were in a national arena.

And as anticipated, it was very different, not only for me but all the House members, as well as the public. When you are in the majority you have a responsibility to set the policy agenda and govern, I saw many rough patches in making governance happen. We started with organization/structural issues that needed immediate attention such as working with a new chief clerk. Of all positions critical to making the House operate this is the position of importance. Throughout the year, and especially during the legislative session, virtually everything about the operation and process happens with this office. The new chief clerk was learning the job as we marched on. Operationally, the new committee chairs had not been named which dictates office assignments, and staffing. After a few days into the session everybody finally knew where to hang their coats and those office addresses and phone extensions could then be shared with the capitol operator so the public could contact us.

The business of House District 9 is very important, my district includes the west half of the City of Gallup and 9 Navajo chapters. My district is unique and has unique needs. It operates under multiple jurisdictions, large geographic boundary bordering Arizona, high unemployment, lack of basic infrastructure, and regular conflicts among elected leaders.

Investments in modern infrastructure lay the foundations for economic development and growth. Building roads, bridges, power transmission lines and making other improvements create jobs. Communities that invest in infrastructure are better positioned to attract investment, stimulate commerce, and support local businesses. Their citizens are more likely to enjoy better health care, sanitation, and others markings of well-being. Because infrastructure projects are expensive, capital outlay provides the critical funding needed to undertake these initiatives.

The potential boost to economic growth from investment in infrastructure projects is both direct and indirect. The direct economic impact goes to those involved in the construction, and the jobs required to support those workers, such as architects, engineer, and on-side food and sanitation providers.

The indirect economic impact is the local, regional, and even national economic boost that results from the construction of the new bridge or the road maintenance. Part of this spillover is

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the so-called “multiplier effect” – where the wages and salaries earned by those working on the bridge are spent on goods and services, which in turn generates additional spending by the providers of those goods and services, and so on.

With all that said we have a good process in place to identify the key issues and projects to be addressed and I take those requests to Santa Fe for consideration by the legislative body and the Governor. I have good partners in my district for moving those requests forward. And over the years I have brought home millions of dollars in capital outlay and general fund projects and I have been successful in hundreds of new laws. Each legislator has by fiscal year the bills they carry and the bills chaptered with the Secretary of State.

The 2015 session produced a small portion of success for House District 9, which is a microcosm for the state as a whole. We got no capital outlay funds, we got no general appropriations funds and we got no framework for investment toward our behavior health needs. Without question this was due to party politics. The two sides could simply not agree, first between the two chambers and then with the Governor's office.

As one legislator, I used the same approach I have used for the past 15 years; it has always worked in the past but not this year. I always tell the freshman legislators as the former caucus chair never “marry” a bill because the emotional roller coaster is not worth it. I also say to them know the members and their position on your issue and work to compromise with them to get your legislation through. I did just that and we lost what I consider to be the most important legislation needed for the Gallup/McKinley County area, House Bill 108, to the Governor's veto pen.

Rep. Patricia Lundstrom, D-Gallup

Guest Column