

Water infrastructure tops chamber's legislative hotlist

Written by By Holly J. Wagner Sun Correspondent
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Water is at the top of Gallup's list of legislative priorities this year.

The city is asking the state to budget for \$30 million for water infrastructure, and that's the McKinley-Gallup Chamber of Commerce's top legislative priority, said Executive Director Bill Lee, who spent the week carrying the region's banner, meeting with legislators in Santa Fe.

The issue surfaced at the city's water rate hearings late last year: the city has been asking for (and getting some) state and federal funding for water projects for years, but most often the ask has been for water itself, often in the form of new wells to keep water flowing until the Navajo-Gallup Water Supply Project is finished.

This year the focus is on shoring up the city's water delivery infrastructure, for now and the future.

Gallupians are familiar with water line breaks and other issues stemming from the age – in some cases 100 years – of the pipes delivering water. What they may not know is that not only are the existing pipes fragile because of age, but they need to be replaced ahead of connecting to the NGWSP because the switch from groundwater to surface water threatens to dislodge whatever scale has built up in the old pipes.

That's a few years off, but the immediate needs are still looming. The city has been trying for a year to set a new water rate structure, and until it does the water department can't borrow or bond for major system improvements.

LOSING THE CHAIR

Lee is dismayed that New Mexico's new House Speaker Javier Martinez booted Greater Gallup Economic Development Corporation Executive Director Patty Lundstrom from the chair of the state House Appropriations and Finance Committee. Lundstrom remains on the committee, but no longer leads it.

"We consider that a real blow to Gallup and McKinley County," Lee said. "Patty has done a wonderful job with the state budget over the last few years. We think it was a big mistake and it was schoolyard politics."

That won't keep Gallup from pursuing its goals, Lee said, "but they have taken her out of any key committees and removed her as chair of appropriations and finance."

OTHER PRIORITIES

What does encourage Lee is that Gov. Michelle Lujan-Grisham is paying attention to organized retail theft, which he says is a bigger problem than many realize. The crimes may be swarms of shoplifters like the incidents that make headlines, or individuals "stealing large quantities of an item and then putting it on the Internet for sale."

But Lee and Lujan-Grisham don't always agree. Among the chamber's other priorities:

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The chamber is against “more onerous regulations on oil and gas, which is what powers our state,” and it’s for the tri-state Hydrogen Hub initiative. “Right now we think there should be a ‘use everything’ approach with balance,” Lee said.

Lujan-Grisham has said she’s open to reforming the state’s gross receipts tax, something the chamber also hopes to do away with because it has the effect of layering taxes.

“Chambers across the state have been asking for this for a long time. It’s basically an economic development killer for our state,” Lee said.

The chamber opposes a proposed \$16-per-hour minimum wage, which Lee said “would make us the second highest in the nation” and he fears will hurt or drive out businesses.

The chamber supports better pay for teachers, Lee said, but not without strings; the organization also wants the school day extended by two hours “to make up what was lost during the pandemic,” and more oversight of results.

“The governor talked about increasing teacher pay. We’re not opposed to that, we just want to see what happened to the funding from last year,” Lee said “We want to see what the data says, how the money is spent.”

The pandemic was bad for almost everyone including schools, but it gave states a windfall of federal funds.

“In this time of large surpluses in cash, states being responsible are putting aside a 30% reserve for when the bottom falls out,” Lee said.

The New Mexico legislative session started on Jan. 17. It ends on March 18.

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