

Teamwork makes the dream work at Gallup-McKinley County Day

Written by By Holly J. Wagner Sun Correspondent
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As the state legislative session swings into high gear, local leaders are optimistic their pitches to state officials went well and will help bring some much-needed funds to McKinley County.

Representatives from the county, City of Gallup, Rehoboth McKinley Christian Hospital and local school systems got their turn at the podium Jan. 24, dubbed McKinley County Day, and in a session with Gov. Michelle Lujan-Grisham Jan. 26.

The annual event gives locals the opportunity to plead their cases and show why their projects should make the list for funding.

“It makes a difference when a community goes up to Santa Fe and speaks directly with legislators,” Gallup Interim City Manager J.M. DeYoung said. “It comes back to Gallup in many

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ways.”

LEADERS MAKE THEIR CASE

Mayor Louie Bonaguidi had a positive outlook after returning from Santa Fe.

“I think it went well. We had a chance to meet with our representatives. We had a meeting with the governor Friday morning at 9 am. She spent over an hour and a half with us,” Bonaguidi said.

Rural hospitals generally and RMCH in particular were big topics at the meetings.

“We talked a long time about the hospital,” Bonaguidi said. “That was a big issue for the whole meeting ... I think we got across to her that the situation is dire.”

RMCH Interim CEO Bill Patten is grateful for the support, in the form of three bills that might offer some financial relief for seven rural hospitals to keep their doors open.

“I appreciated that there was uniform support through the constituencies in the room for RMCH, and a common agreement that we cannot allow RMCH to fail,” he said.

RMCH is one of the hospitals that could benefit from the bills. The same problems – debt, low revenue, inflation and staffing issues – are common across the group of hospitals from around the state.

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“The debt was the other big topic. People wanted to know, how is it we are going to get that debt resolved?” Patten said.

He’s been busy negotiating with creditors to chip away at the \$38 million in debt that RMCH incurred before he took the job. He’s also lobbying to get the state to backfill the payroll support RMCH has gotten from the city and county to “make local governments whole on the money they have given us.”

INFRASTRUCTURE CHALLENGES

Meanwhile, Gallup officials were also seeking money for a water treatment plant and a reverse osmosis treatment system that could make brackish water potable, a high priority locally as the date for completion of the Navajo Gallup Water Supply Project seems to get pushed back a little bit every year.

Gallup was also asking for \$500,000 for street repairs begun last year. With a pandemic hangover in labor and rising supply costs, last year’s money only went half as far as expected.

That was also a starting point for McKinley County. This year, instead of asking for new project funding, the county’s asks were all about finishing projects that have already begun, Commissioner Robert Baca said.

“They are tired of giving money to start projects and never finish them,” he said.

For the county that mainly means roads and bridges, the industrial park project on Carbon Coal Road and Red Rock Park.

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While roads are an ongoing maintenance project, the industrial park is expected to generate revenue when it's done. That makes getting a gas line to it a high priority.

"We've been trying to get a gas line to the industrial park and that's taking 18 months," Baca said.

Across agencies, officials have high hopes for HB177, which would create a new pot of state money that local agencies could use as a source of matching money for federal funding. Since agencies have to disclose the source of the match when they apply, they would be able to cite that source instead of having to find money for every match in their own coffers. The money would stay in the state pot until federal funding is granted.

Not every application receives federal favor, so the money in the pot could have outsize impact because multiple agencies could "use" the fund on paper, but the state would only have to shell out for projects that get federal approval.

The session also included tributes to Judge Doug Decker, who was County Attorney for 27 years before taking the bench, and Pastor Mike Kleeberger, who serves as chaplain to both Gallup Police and McKinley County Sheriff's departments. Through his Emmanuel Baptist Church, Kleeberger also provides family and community support with things like bereavement counseling and food deliveries, especially during the pandemic.

It never hurts to be memorable, and sometimes tchotchkes are the key. The local contingent continued its tradition of giving legislators custom lapel pins, which are designed each year to emphasize a particular issue in the region. This year's pin is a native water jug, designed to put the spotlight on the need for water project funding.

"One thing that has become a popular, coveted item up in the Legislature has been the pins that the Gallup Day group hands out to help them remember the Gallup community and show a little appreciation for what they have done for — as well as do for us in the future," DeYoung said.

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