GREATER ALBUQUERQUE CHAMBER OF COMMERCE

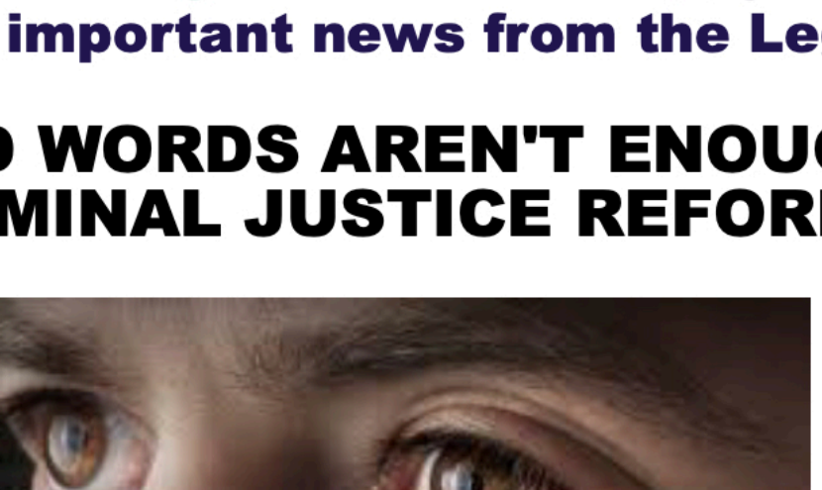
Legislative RoundUp

2025 Regular Session
Saturday, March 22, 2025

57th Legislature
Day Sixty

Welcome to the Legislative RoundUp, your update on the most important news from the Legislature

TEARS AND WORDS AREN'T ENOUGH - NM NEEDS CRIMINAL JUSTICE REFORM NOW



When horrific mass shootings, like what just happened in Las Cruces, occur, we and all people of goodwill feel a personal loss and a personal fear. What if that had been my spouse, my child, my relative, my friend? We also tear up for the folks injured or killed and their families. Kind hearts grieve and express condolences and concern. That's appropriate, wonderful and caring - it's an expression of the very human sense of family and community that's been deeply violated, made deeply sorrowful. Sure, we go on with life, but somewhere in our souls is a lasting scar, a remembrance never to be forgotten.

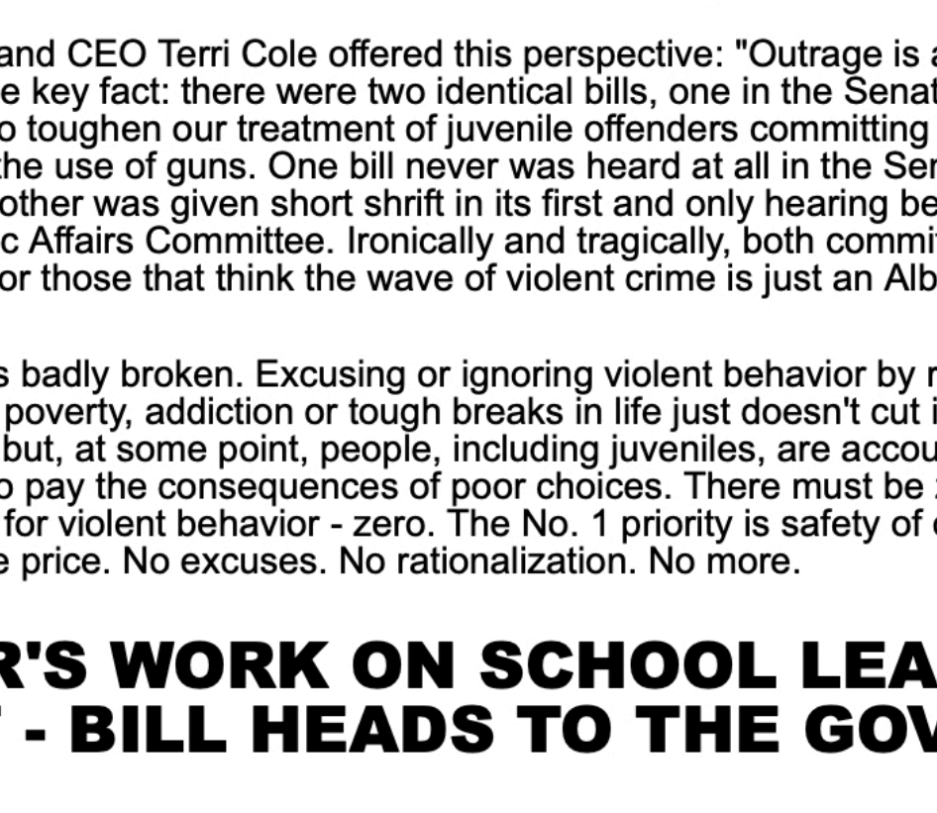
Incidents like this, of gang shootings, of human trafficking and fentanyl deaths, occur across our communities way too often. All these violent crimes and more are a plague, a growing pestilence. It must stop, and that means more action on the part of the Legislature. The governor laid the facts plainly on the table:

"The devastating loss of officer Jonah Hernandez in Las Cruces last year, and now this mass shooting, underscore the Legislature's years-long failure to address the crime crisis shattering lives and communities in our state. New Mexicans are heartbroken, and they should also be outraged that their Legislature will adjourn today without having passed a single bill to address juvenile crime or ban assault weapons.Their inaction is appalling and unacceptable."

Chamber President and CEO Terri Cole offered this perspective: "Outrage is a good descriptor. Consider just this one key fact: there were two identical bills, one in the Senate and one in the House, that sought to toughen our treatment of juvenile offenders committing violent crimes, especially involving the use of guns. One bill never was heard at all in the Senate Judiciary Committee, and the other was given short shrift in its first and only hearing before the House Consumer and Public Affairs Committee. Ironically and tragically, both committee chairs are from Doña Ana County. For those that think the wave of violent crime is just an Albuquerque problem, think again."

Our justice system is badly broken. Excusing or ignoring violent behavior by rationalizing it as the result of young age, poverty, addiction or tough breaks in life just doesn't cut it. Yes, those are all contributing factors, but, at some point, people, including juveniles, are accountable for their own behavior and have to pay the consequences of poor choices. There must be zero tolerance from juveniles and adults for violent behavior - zero. The No. 1 priority is safety of our loved ones. Bad guys have to pay the price. No excuses. No rationalization. No more.

CHAMBER'S WORK ON SCHOOL LEADERSHIP PAYS OFF - BILL HEADS TO THE GOVERNOR


NOVEMBER 2022
SCHOOL LEADERSHIP
Improved Student Outcomes Won't Happen without Strong School Leadership: Recommendations for New Mexico
Gina Ikemoto, PhD & Erika Hunt, PhD

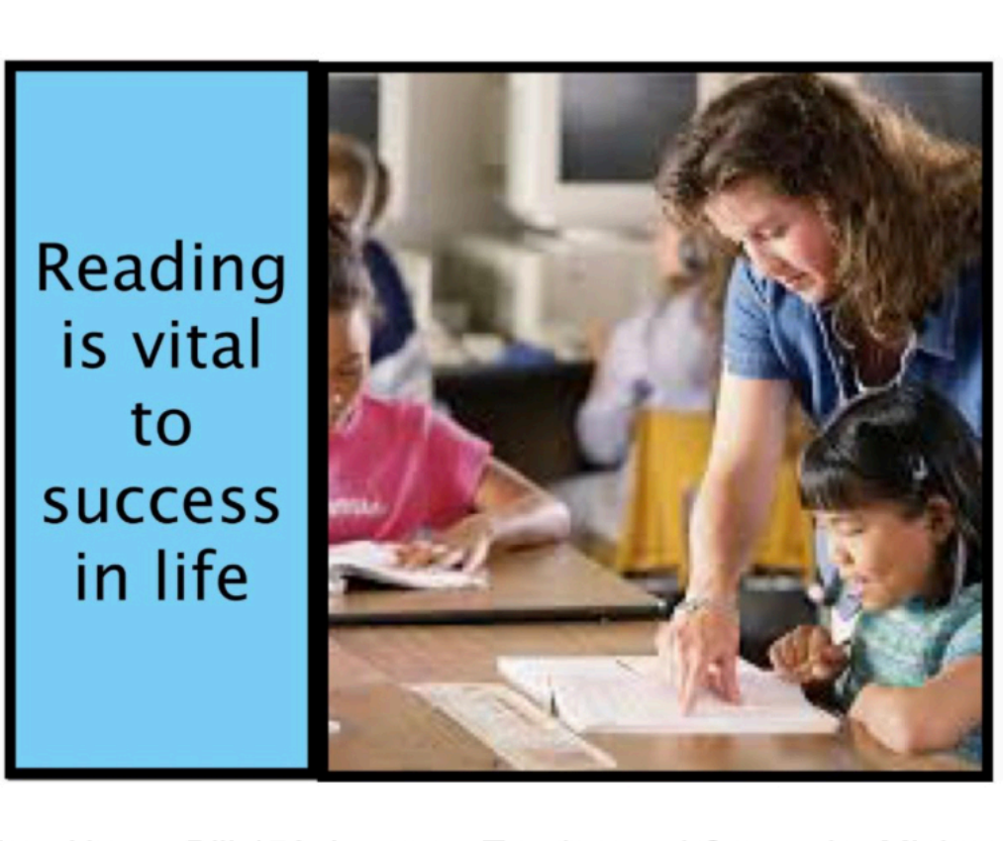
GREATER ALBUQUERQUE CHAMBER OF COMMERCE
Education Research & Development, LLC

During Saturday's House floor session, representatives concurred with amendments made by the Senate on House Bill 157. The bill is sponsored by Reps. Joy Garratt (D-Bernalillo), Brian Baca (R-Valencia) and Raymundo Lara (D-Doña Ana), and it has as its goal achievement of nationally recognized best practices for principal (and superintendent) training, development and mentorship. A principal must lead a culture of learning, and with the right training and support, New Mexico can achieve a consistency of leadership. Turnover among principals is very high due to a number of factors, including lack of preparation for leadership and local support. Unfortunately, amendments added by the Senate effectively move the implementation of requirements for training and residency programs out so far into the future that it will do nothing between now and 2033.

The Chamber has long advocated for exactly this kind of change - and it was a key component of this year's Legislative Agenda - to "pass legislation to raise the standards for principal preparation in New Mexico, in alignment with best practices." Through a grant from the Thornburg and Los Alamos Laboratory foundations, in 2022 the Chamber engaged Education Research and Development, a nationally recognized group of experts, to prepare a report on school leadership, and many of those recommendations are included in HB 157. Read the report here.

The bill heads to the governor's desk.

PROVEN SCIENCE OF READING MAKES IT THROUGH GANTLET AS AN AMENDMENT


Reading is vital to success in life

On Saturday morning, House Bill 156, Increase Teacher and Counselor Minimum Salaries, was given concurrence on the House floor.

The original bill, sponsored by Rep. Joy Garratt (D-Bernalillo) and Senate Pro Tempore Mimi Stewart (D-Bernalillo), amends the School Personnel Act to increase minimum salaries for Level 1 teachers to $55,000, for Level 2 teachers to $65,000 and for Level 3A teachers and counselors to $75,000. The Senate Finance Committee amended the bill to include a statutory requirement that the Science of Reading be taught in all collegiate teacher preparation training.

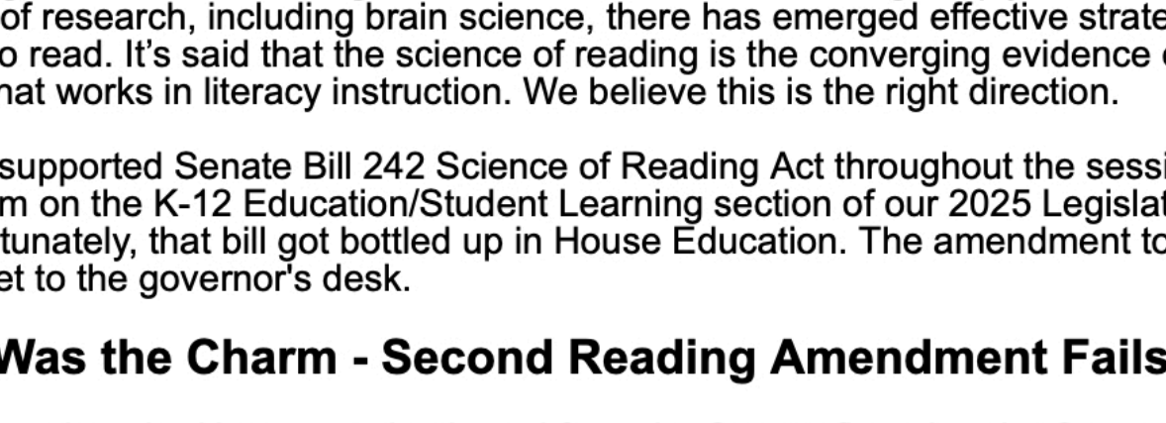
The Chamber has long been involved in efforts to help lift student achievement. Through all that work, going back almost two decades, we know how critically important learning to read is. It's one of the reasons we started the Albuquerque Reads program, staffed by volunteers reading to children helping them to love reading. The current method of teaching simply hasn't worked. After decades of research, including brain science, there has emerged effective strategies of teaching kids to read. It's said that the science of reading is the converging evidence of what matters and what works in literacy instruction. We believe this is the right direction.

The Chamber supported Senate Bill 242 Science of Reading Act throughout the session; in fact it is the first item on the K-12 Education/Student Learning section of our 2025 Legislative Agenda. Unfortunately, that bill got bottled up in House Education. The amendment to HB 156 means it will get to the governor's desk.

Two Tries Was the Charm - Second Reading Amendment Fails

On Saturday morning, the House received word from the Senate floor that the Senate receded from the same Science of Reading amendment to House Bill 167, Higher Ed Payment for Certain Tests. On Friday night, representatives didn't like the idea of including structured literacy instruction in this bill. After some negotiations (see article above), structured literacy was included in HB 156 and, therefore, the Senate agreed to take the same language out of HB 167 so it could proceed to the governor in its original form. The bill, which is sponsored by Reps. Joy Garratt (D-Bernalillo), E. Diane Torres-Velásquez (D-Bernalillo) and Sen. Nicole Tobiassen (R-Bernalillo), makes GED testing for adults free in New Mexico.

TRADE PORTS BILL CROSSES THE BRIDGE FROM LEGISLATURE TO GOVERNOR'S DESK



House Bill 19, Rep. Patty Lundstrom's (D-McKinley) Trade Ports Development Act, crossed the Legislative finish line in the countdown to the end of this year's session. We've been holding our breath because this is an important economic development bill that will help New Mexico get on the road to reaching its full potential.

HB 19 was heard in a quick Senate Finance Committee meeting squeezed in between Senate floor sessions last night. The committee worked in a few amendments that add additional guardrails to the bill, like an extra layer of approvals from the Board of Finance and a clawback provision enforced by the attorney general.

The bill was approved on the Senate floor 28-9 with less than an hour to go before *sine die*. Lundstrom wasted no time in getting the bill over to the House, where final concurrence with the Senate's changes sends the bill upstairs for the governor's action.

Sen. Roberto "Bobby" Gonzales (D-Los Alamos, Rio Arriba, Taos & Santa Fe) carried the legislation on the Senate floor and explained the bill to his colleagues, "This act creates the opportunity for the state to enter into a public-private partnership (PPP) agreement for the construction of a trade port. The purpose of this bill is to promote economic development through infrastructure projects. The bill allows the state to enter into up to 30-year agreements with private partners for trade, and trade port projects, and provides for taxpayer dollar protection."

The bill requires the state Board of Finance to review and give final approval of the PPP agreement by the Economic Development Department. Additional protections include requiring the attorney general to enforce clawbacks and preventing Economic Development Department staff from being hired by trade ports for two years following employment with the department. The bill also establishes an advisory committee composed of various agencies, secretaries and members appointed by the Legislature. The budget includes $50 million in the coming year's budget for this initiative.

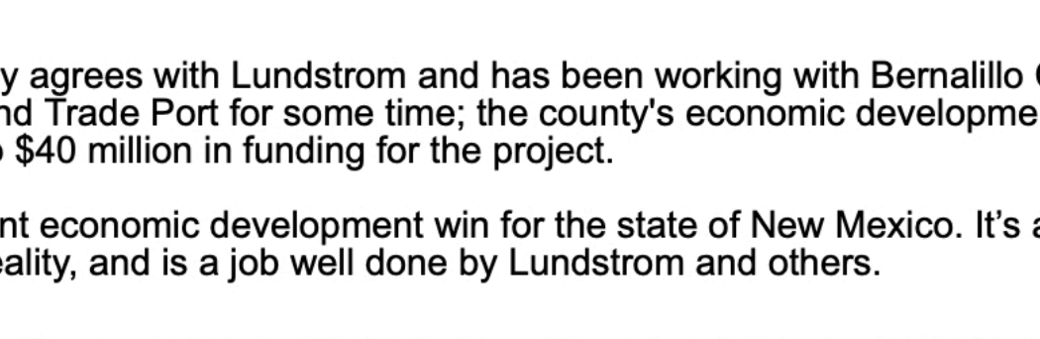
In discussing the legislation, Minority Leader William Sharer (R-San Juan) said, "I'm looking at the map of New Mexico and I'm wondering where our port is. It doesn't look like we have any place to park a ship. I'm guessing these will be "inland ports."

He's right. Lundstrom believes in the power of this bill, and inland ports, to transform New Mexico from a nice place to drive through into a global player in economic trade. The goal is to make New Mexico more than just a bridge state. We have a built-in north-south corridor with the Santa Teresa Borderplex ready to maximize expansions of manufacturing plants in Mexico. We have the existing east-west corridors of Interstate 10 and Interstate 40 that are already getting goods to and from the West Coast and beyond. Communities from Bernalillo County, to Gallup and McKinley County, to Santa Teresa have recognized the opportunities in developing inland ports.

The Chamber fully agrees with Lundstrom and has been working with Bernalillo County on the Interstate 40 Inland Trade Port for some time; the county's economic development experts have amassed close to $40 million in funding for the project.

This is a significant economic development win for the state of New Mexico. It's a signature away from becoming reality, and is a job well done by Lundstrom and others.

BILL TO SET UP COLLEGE BUILDING FUND MAKES IT THROUGH, SENT TO GOVERNOR



House Bill 449, sponsored by Rep. Derrick Lente (D-Rio Arriba, Sandoval & San Juan), creates a statutory framework for a fund to support major academic and research projects at higher education institutions as well as student housing and student life projects, which are not currently eligible for funding through the statewide higher education capital outlay process. The bill was sent to the governor today.

According to the fiscal impact report, "general obligation (GO) bond capacity is insufficient to meet demand to replace and repair higher education facilities. Construction costs have risen steeply over the last several years and have far outpaced modest annual increases to general obligation bond capacity. From 2022 to 2024, requests for new construction projects from higher education institutions increased by 81% on a per-square-foot basis. General obligation bond capacity rose only 12% over the same period. This has made it increasingly difficult to fully fund new major construction in any single year."

This fund would be administered by the Higher Education Department and potentially filled with cash from reserves, abandoned capital outlay projects or other appropriations. It will create the mechanism to fund major projects like the UNM Medical School by transferring major dollars from reserves. Many other major higher education projects in New Mexico could benefit from this new fund. This might get us a step closer to identifying major higher education projects in New Mexico that are needed verses trying (unsuccessfully) to solve these major problems only through capital outlay. Thanks again to the oil and gas industry for pumping oil from the ground and cash into the state reserve coffers. What would we do without you?!

I'LL SEE YOU AND RAISE YOU ONE - MOVES TO UPDATE 'HARM TO SELF, OTHERS' GO BUST

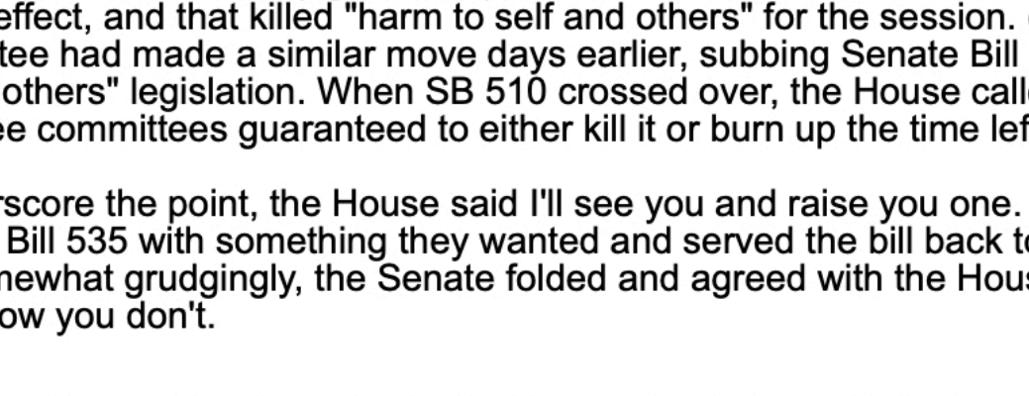
As the session draws to a close, sometimes clever moves push a bill over the finish line. It's a time-honored game of "now you see it, now you don't." The Senate tried several times to overcome the House's refusal to adopt legislation refining the definition of "harm to self and others." The update is in an attempt to slow the revolving door of crime and push people toward treatment and rehabilitation rather than a night in jail and a return to the streets to struggle with addiction or mental health issues. It's a reform the Chamber really supports.

But as the hours in the legislative hourglass drain away, there's not enough time to run a bill all the way through the parliamentary labyrinth. So, what to do? Hijack a bill from the opposite house and put your stuff in it. That way, you only have to return it to the other chamber for concurrence in amendments.

Here's a real-life example from this session: The Senate took House Bill 149 and put an amendment in to change the definition of "harm to self and others," passed the bill and sent it back to the House for concurrence (agreement) on amendments. The House said, "no thanks" "or words to that effect, and that killed "harm to self and others" for the session. (The Senate Judiciary Committee had made a similar move days earlier, subbing Senate Bill 510 with the "harm to self and others" legislation. When SB 510 crossed over, the House called that play and assigned it to three committees guaranteed to either kill it or burn up the time left in the session.)

And, just to underscore the point, the House said I'll see you and raise you one. Members amended Senate Bill 535 with something they wanted and served the bill back to the Senate for concurrence. Somewhat grudgingly, the Senate folded and agreed with the House amendments. Now you see it, now you don't.

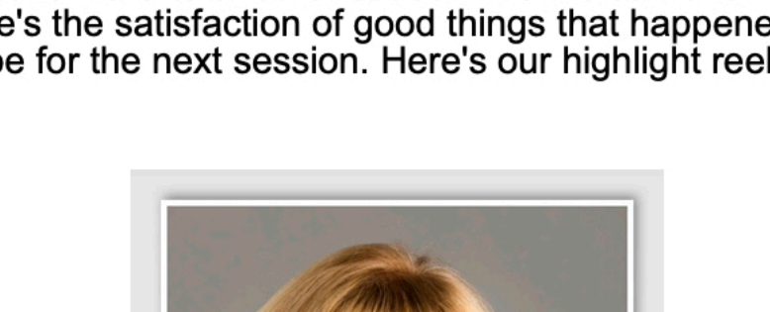
SENATE CLOCK RUNS OUT ON VETO OVERRIDE TO ALLOW 4-DAY SCHOOL WEEKS



House Minority Leader Gail Armstrong represents the geographically largest district in the state, encompassing all or part of Catron, Sierra, Socorro and Valencia counties. It's pretty obviously a very rural district, where students often have to travel an hour or more one way to get to school. Consequently, several districts have opted for four-day rather than five-day school weeks. The Public Education Department, however, issued a firm requirement that school districts had to provide a minimum of 180 school days, thereby precluding four-day school weeks.

In response, Armstrong, a Republican, introduced House Bill 65 that leaves it up to local school boards to determine the school calendar. She points out that many of her four-day schools are outperforming most other schools in the state. The bill passed the House 64-0 and the Senate 38-0. Defending her education department, the governor vetoed HB 65. Today, the House voted to override the governor's veto 64-0. The Senate didn't get around to it - either due to lack of time or to shield the governor from an override. Done for this session.

END OF A SEASON ... END OF A SESSION ... MIXED RESULTS AND MIXED EMOTIONS



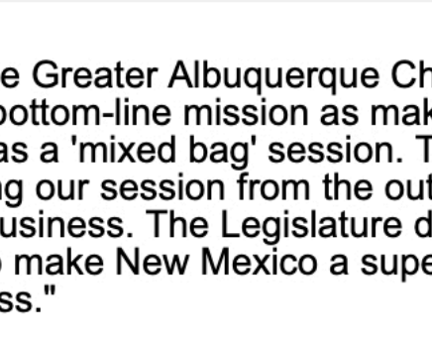
For any of us, the end of a season and the start of another brings mixed emotions of satisfaction, disappointment and hope. It's like loving the Super Bowl and hating the reality that it's a long time until football is back. But, the thought of green grass, the crack of the bat and wafting of roasting hot dogs lures us forward to another season. It's the same for folks deeply involved in a legislative session - there's the satisfaction of good things that happened, disappointment over those that didn't and hope for the next session. Here's our highlight reel from the first session of the 57th Legislature.

Terri Cole
President and CEO
GACC

Terri Cole, president and CEO of the Greater Albuquerque Chamber of Commerce, along with the board of directors, has set our bottom-line mission as making New Mexico competitive. Her assessment is that "Ultimately, it was a 'mixed bag' session. There may be a few bright spots here and there, but anyone watching our session from the outside would not get a sense that we are a competitive place to grow a business. The Legislature did very little to improve New Mexico's competitiveness, that is to make New Mexico a superior state in which to raise a family, to work or to start and run a business."

In one of the most beautiful and culturally rich states, the brilliance of our quality of life is badly tarnished by a horrible problem of crime, a crippled health care system and an inadequate educational system wherein our children are not learning to read or do math. And, make no mistake, we must compete with other states if we are to grow our economy in a way that provides higher-paying jobs and more wealth for our citizens so that fewer and fewer live in poverty and struggle every day to make ends meet. Nothing ends poverty of mind, spirit and physical security like a good job.

SATISFACTION WITH THE GOOD THAT HAPPENED



Of course, "good" and "satisfaction" are dependent on where you stand. It's like a quarterback throwing an interception - bad for him, good for the free safety. In the business community, it's often what didn't happen that is good and brings satisfaction. Good for us, bad for the sponsor. And sometimes, vice versa, what passed is good and what didn't is bad. With that perspective in mind, here we go for a fly over the session in review.

PUBLIC SAFETY - A GOOD START, BUT...

Despite some claims to the contrary, the governor calling a special session last summer shone a bright light on the need for the Legislature to step up and deal with the crime plague. And on the good-news side, they passed some important legislation:

- The "public-safety package " which rolled six bills together dealing with shooting threats, auto theft, Glock switches, enhanced penalties for drug trafficking, revisions to criminal competency statutes and blood testing for drug and alcohol DUI.
- Adding heinous crimes like human trafficking, drug trafficking and criminal sexual penetration to the racketeering statute, allowing law enforcement and prosecutors to go after organized crime gangs and groups.
- "Stacking" embezzlement charges so that repeat offenders suffer felony penalties. It's similar to steps taken to fight retail theft - and those steps are working.
- Passage of various significant changes to the behavioral health system including a fund to ensure long-term support for behavioral health services.
- Significant reform in dealing with pre- and postnatal treatment of babies born exposed or addicted to controlled substances or alcohol.
- Establishing an independent watchdog agency to oversee CYFD services for children and families.
- Significant budget support for law enforcement and first-responder equipment, recruitment and training.

MORE WORK TO BE DONE

And on the bad-news side there's lawmakers:

- Totally refusing to deal with juvenile crime, the fastest-growing area of crime, especially when it comes to murder, illegal gun usage, auto theft, drug trafficking and "meanness" crimes like recording running over a bicycle rider and laughing while watching the video. It's sick.
- Refusing to enhance penalties for convicted felons carrying firearms - they're not supposed to have guns.
- Refusing to set statutory requirements for detaining convicted violent offenders pending trial for yet another crime. Judges aren't getting the job done, so it's high time to give them some help.
- Rejecting bills to better protect children such as declaring exposure of a child to controlled substances is child abuse.
- Turning down creation of a new crime titled "home invasion." It's beyond burglary when someone breaks into your home - it's stealing your peace of mind and sense of safety in your own home.
- And more, but you get the idea.

IT'S NOT HEALTH CARE IF YOU CAN'T GET AN APPOINTMENT

Far and away this is the biggest missed opportunity of the session. Essentially nothing got done to keep doctors and other health care professionals in our state nor to attract them to our state. With twice the national average of medical malpractice awards, runaway malpractice insurance rates, settlements forced by threats of ridiculously high punitive damage claims and bevies of trial lawyers, many from out of state, standing in line for their shot at practicing here. It's no wonder doctors are leaving and avoiding practicing here in the first place.

All of the surrounding states have fair and reasonable caps on awards, lawyer fees and punitive damages. A very well-thought-out bill developed by Think New Mexico and sponsored by the Legislature's only doctor\ waited six weeks to get an appointment - er - hearing before the Senate Health and Consumer Affairs Committee pulled the plug on the bill with trial lawyers smiling in the background. And, if that weren't enough, here some other things that didn't get done, although there was plenty of legislation introduced:

- No increase in loan repayment assistance for health care professionals - it's not uncommon for a new doctor starting out to be dragging $300,000 or more in debt. New Mexico only grants up to $75,000 in loan repayment assistance - other states are well into the six figures.
- No GRT tax relief on charges for medical care services. This is especially bad in New Mexico where nearly half of our citizens are on Medicaid and reimbursement to doctors is below the cost of service to begin with, so adding tax exacerbates the problem. Other states have about 25% of their citizens on Medicaid compared to our 45%. Private insurance pays a lot better than Medicaid, so it doesn't take an advanced degree to figure out the economics. Medicaid is not only tough on doctors but also on hospitals that often are treating very serious conditions without adequate reimbursement. (The skinny tax package did provide for a GRT exemption on coinsurance charges paid by patients, but this doesn't do much, if anything, for doctors.)
- In a similar vein, nothing was done to increase tax credits for rural practitioners. If people in Albuquerque think medical care is inaccessible, try living in one of our small towns.
- Plaintiffs lawyers blocked efforts to join interstate compacts that would allow a variety of health care professions to practice here without having to undergo burdensome relicensing in our state. Health care workers would have to be in good standing in their own states and be subject to New Mexico's professional standard of care rules. This might attract some to move here or for spouses of military families to practice while on duty in our state. Moreover, telemedicine connections can be provided for consultations on complicated cases or to fill in when specialty knowledge is needed. Why the objection from plaintiffs lawyers? Because there is an immunity against litigation baked into the compacts.

A FEW RAYS OF SUNSHINE

The UNM School of Medicine did receive $30 million for the design and planning of a new medical school and renovation of the existing facility. That's good for UNM and for the docs we are trying to recruit to the school and to New Mexico. And the School of Pharmacy received $25 for renovation and upgrades. Also, a compromise bill acceptable to the industry was fashioned to govern hospital mergers and acquisitions.

BAD THINGS THAT DIDN'T HAPPEN

Very importantly, we and others stopped statutory establishment of nurse-to-patient ratios. While intended as a means to improve patient care, the likely result would be less available care given the workforce shortages. Fewer patients per nurse is a goal we'd all like to achieve. The problem is, more nurses can't be hired if they don't exist.

Another well-intended but potentially budget-busting and financially dangerous proposal is called "Medicaid Forward." This idea would basically result in everyone in the state (other than some veterans, Medicare patients and a few people still with private insurance) being on Medicaid. Medicaid is already the second-biggest portion of the state's general fund, trailing only public education. And, there are realistic concerns about federal cuts to Medicaid funding. State budget officials are deeply concerned about how they can pay for what we have now, much less adding thousands more recipients. And, if you're a doctor or hospital, the last thing you want to hear about is more Medicaid patients that Medicaid reimbursement won't pay adequately for.

BUILDING A BUFFER AGAINST BUDGET CUTS

In response to potential federal budget cuts, legislators wisely created a Medicaid Trust Fund and deposited $100 million as a down payment for the goal of achieving a $1 billion fund corpus. It's a start, but it's a long-term proposition, not likely to help much in the short term. The concern over cuts is what has prompted the governor to potentially call a special session in the fall after the amount of cuts is known. Seems to us that a special session ought to do a lot more than just deal with Medicaid cuts. Rinse, repeat and see above.

BUILDING OPPORTUNITY THROUGH A STRONGER ECONOMY

It's a Mixed Bag...Let's Start with Some Good Things

It seems like there is finally a willingness to put some money into diversifying our economy, especially in high-tech industries and to bolster efforts to attract visitors, new businesses and improve the quality of life.

- The Tourism department received $18 million for national and international advertising; $8 million for the Roswell Air Show (which could turn into a new Balloon Fiesta); $2 million to market New Mexico as a good place to do business; and $2.5 million for the Route 66 centennial celebration along with a steady budget.
- The Economic Development Department received $6.7 million for JTIP and $70 million of ongoing funding for LEDA. With the passage of the trade port bill, the department will be overseeing $50 million to facilitate inland trade ports throughout the state. In addition meaningful appropriations were made to support bioscience and quantum technology, including $40 million to help secure federal grants. Another big win is funding and statutory structure of site-readiness preparation, including up-front utility service.
- Other projects and programs for economic development include high-tech worker support, entrepreneurship incubators, innovation hubs, trails and outdoor infrastructure, broadband funding and a statewide recreation center.
- Passage of the governor's strategic water plan is a first big step in addressing water availability. The focus is conversion of brackish water to fresh by funding projects and expanding research by NMSU and New Mexico Tech.
- The State Fair TIDD was placed in statute, enabling development of a master plan to look at all options for the future of the fair. The TIDD could issue up to $1 billion in bonds, subject to approval by state agencies and the Legislature. Many people look at the State Fair as an opportunity to redevelop a blighted area while finding a better, more expansive home for the fair. But that's prejudging the results of the master plan. There's a lot more discussion to be had on this subject.
- UNM athletics was given a boost in recurring funding, and money was appropriated to look into development of a new stadium.
- Funds were received to address local housing needs and recreation venues, including the Balloon Fiesta.

Stopping Some Bad Things from Happening Like...

The Obvious Assault on the Oil and Gas Industry

In concert with the New Mexico Oil and Gas Association (NMOGA), we worked hand-in-glove to push back against the extreme environmental and community organizer advocates that view the industry as bad for New Mexico despite its enormous financial contributions to the state and jobs it creates for New Mexicans. Legislation to mandate unworkable well setbacks, fees, fines and tax increases along with more regulation are all tools used by the opponents of energy development. The result of standing strong against these assaults was stopping 16 anti-industry bills and supporting four that were eventually lost but served as a platform of pro industry advocacy and education. The biggest victory of all was turning back a massive increase on oil excise taxes that would have sucked up over $400 million that otherwise could be invested in new well development and job creation. Lest we forget, this is the industry that supports nearly half of the state's general fund and, through various permanent funds, our schools.

A Costly Paid Family and Medical Leave Proposal

This bill has had more permutations than Michael Jordan has sneakers. Without going into all the details and nuances, the left sneaker featured six weeks of paid family medical leave accompanied by a $200-plus million payroll tax increase on employees and employers to pay for it. The right sneaker featured 12 weeks of unpaid leave and a $9,000 "refund" (we were never sure about what was being refunded) to parents at the birth, adoption or fostering of a child. This, too, cost about $200 million per year and was unfunded, leaving it up to future legislatures to figure out how to absorb the budget hit. Suggestions to pay for the program from the Early Childhood Trust Fund were not well received in important places, like the fourth floor of the Roundhouse.

Stopping New Taxes

Other than the increase to wholesale liquor taxes, efforts to increase corporate income taxes and the aforementioned oil excise tax were stopped. Equally important were turning back a herd of fees, fines and penalties. One disappointment was the inability to prevent tax lightning on multifamily housing properties. However, efforts to repeal the statewide ban on rent control were nixed.

No Green Amendment or Zero Emissions Requirements

The Green Amendment would bake into the state's constitution a broad yet vague set of "rights" to clean air, water, land and a healthful environment. Who doesn't want that? In principle, no one - until the hounds of litigation are set loose on your business, resulting in paying lawyers becoming your new product line. Or worse yet, a business simply throws in the towel and moves to Texas. This bill was defeated.

In a similar vein, a proposed zero greenhouse gas emissions target (2050 levels of emissions measured against a 2005 baseline) would likely result, down the road, in onerous regulations that would affect every nook and cranny of our economy, not to mention our homes. It's not hard to imagine a complete ban on gasoline- or diesel-powered vehicles, a mandate to require all-electric homes or driving out businesses requiring high levels of heat for processing. This bill was also defeated.

Some Bad Things Did Happen, But Only a Few

- Legislation was sent to the governor to require payment of prevailing wages on IRB projects, which will increase the cost of already costly construction even more. New Mexico has trouble attracting private capital, and moves like this are detrimental.
- A "community benefits fund" was approved and sent to the governor to expend $240 million on poorly defined "community projects" that will address climate change. How the success or failure of this initiative will be measured is an open question probably because there isn't a way to do it. This is $240 million that coulda/shoulda funded multiple health care initiatives.

EDUCATION LOST IN THE LAND OF THE FORGOTTEN

We're beginning to get a sense that legislator/educators (and there are many) are bewildered about what to do next. The state has heaped money on schools, our teachers are among the highest paid in the region and student achievement improvements are not happening. Our kids' competency rankings in reading and math are the worst in the nation. Graduation rates are at the bottom, and school attendance has failed to rebound after COVID. Absenteeism is rampant. Despite free college, enrollment levels have fallen and are only beginning to tick upward a tad. Too often our college graduates leave the state for greener pastures elsewhere, leaving behind a declining and aging population.

Teacher unions have and continue to be a stumbling block on the path to improvement, resisting new methods of teaching reading and math. Only at the last minute was legislation salvaged to require the teaching of structured literacy in all teacher preparation courses. Perhaps looking for a scapegoat, a lot of time has been wasted blaming "education governance" for all the problems, the purported solution being to make a "back to the future" move to reinstate a failed system of a state school board and a state superintendent of public education.

In many ways, it's really not worth having an argument because the form of governance doesn't really matter. What matters is reaching kids with methods that result in learning to read and do math. It's about providing intensive tutoring where necessary. It's about lifting school leadership to higher levels of professionalism. In short, it's all about the kids and what kids need, not about adults fussing with governance structures.

Unfortunately, good legislation to do many of these student-oriented things went nowhere or was watered down. For example, increased principal and superintendent licensing requirements involving greater training and mentoring were pushed off until 2033. In eight years a child will go from kindergarten to eighth grade without the benefit of better-performing school leadership. Next to teachers, principals are the most important factor to boost school performance.

Fortunately, there was no adverse legislation to restrict charter school expansion. This, in and of itself, is amazing. Charter schools are very often the examples of how good education can be when the right ingredients of involved parents, quality faculty and strong school leadership are brought together. Also on the bright side is increased funding for, and credit recognition of, career technical training at the high school and junior college level gaining legislative support. CTE has proven to be a way to engage students looking to graduate with job skills to help support a family or because they have little interest in college preparatory instruction. Let's hope the bewilderment ends soon and we get back on track to making some bold moves to help kids learn.

WRAPPING UP THE WRAP-UP

It's been our honor to represent the business community in Santa Fe. We deeply appreciate the support of our membership, the leadership of our board of directors and the quality of our staff. To our faithful readers, our thanks for being with us on the journey through the first session of the 57th Legislature. And so, for one final time, thanks for being with us, and we'll look forward to bringing you all the news and views ... next year. Good night.

The Legislative RoundUp, published during the New Mexico Legislative Session by the Greater Albuquerque Chamber of Commerce, provides information on local and state public policy and business issues that affect you.

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