

## Editorial

# Capital outlay fiasco a sign that change is needed

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Last week, New Mexico lawmakers managed to pass a capital outlay bill that included almost \$300 million in public works projects across the state. That bill floundered at the end of the legislative session in March because of partisan bickering. Local leaders, already struggling to make ends meet, were more than a little upset to see a whole lot of money sitting idle. To their relief, Gov. Susana Martinez finally reached a deal with legislative leaders to call a one-day special session — a chance to get the bill through and get jobs funded. For local governments and organizations counting on that money to get brick and mortar projects going, it was a victory.

But to us, the political dysfunction that led to this special session is symptomatic of a system for funding capital projects that is illogical and inefficient.

Every year, capital outlay is the bacon that state legislators bring back from Santa Fe to keep constituents satisfied. Directing a few thousands dollars to their home districts to build a senior center, buy a dumptruck or fix an air conditioner is a great way to make people happy (and, of course, drum up votes come the next election).

But that's exactly the problem.

New Mexico is a poor state with very limited resources and tremendous needs. So why do we allow hundreds of millions of dollars to go to projects across the state with relatively little assessment of whether they are the best investments we can make in our communities?

For instance, consider the \$1.5 million in the capital outlay bill to build a new Department of Transportation Facility in Pe-asco. Sen. Carlos Cisneros, D-Questa, told a reporter last week the new building "was really not needed." A million- and-a-half dollars for a new building when the roads under the jurisdiction of that same agency are in appalling shape? Is that the best use of that money?

Similarly, Rep. Roberto "Bobby" Gonzales told our staff this spring that, in some cases, he chooses to sponsor projects for funding simply because he was approached by a lobbyist.

We understand there's some effort to vet and rank projects during the session, but clearly that process could be more robust. We are not saying every project selected for funding is not worthy. But we would like more justification explaining why projects are funded and at what amount.

We can't ignore the argument that the current system probably benefits very rural communities like ours. Each legislator nominates his or her list of projects and fights to get them funded. It's a good way to spread the love around.

And not surprisingly, when you ask those groups that are getting funding, they're completely happy with the system, even though in many cases the money allocated by the legislator isn't enough to get a project finished.

Every little bit counts, they say.

But we can't help but wonder if that big pile of money becomes so diluted as to be, in many cases, essentially useless.

In the months before the beginning of the 2016 legislative session, we strongly encourage our elected officials to seriously consider substantive changes to the way the state pays for capital improvement projects. The governor shouldn't have to call a special session after a last-minute effort to ram a capital outlay bill fails. There has to be a better way.