

‘Él que no llora, no mama’

Small cities spend a lot to compete for state funding

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Questa native Gabe Cisneros isn't the typical special interest lobbyist.

He's not working on behalf of companies that want looser regulations or fighting for stricter carbon emissions rules.

When Cisneros walks into the state capitol in Santa Fe, he represents local governments across Northern New Mexico, including several in Taos County. During the 30-day legislative session that began this week, his sole responsibility is to get as much state money as possible into the coffers of local governments so towns and counties can fix roads, build sewage plants and renovate community centers.

But increasing scrutiny on the process of doling out this money — known as “capital outlay funding” — has some wondering why taxpayers in small communities need to hire someone like Cisneros to lobby their own elected officials for support.

In an interview Monday (Jan. 18), Cisneros explained that the process by which legislators divvy up funding for infrastructure projects around the state is overtly political.

During the legislative session, the state decides how much money is available for capital outlay. And every senator and representative gets an equal portion of the funding pie to slice up among their constituencies as they see fit.

Cisneros says common sense would dictate that politicians direct most of the pork back to the biggest towns and cities in his or her district. Keep voters in the population centers happy and you'll get re-elected, the logic goes.

But Cisneros says a big part of his job is to make sure that money spreads out to more rural areas, where there might be fewer voters, but still plenty of needs.

“A lot of times, for these small communities, it's just a little bone that they're being thrown, and everybody has to share,” Cisneros says.

It's like an old Spanish saying goes, he says: “*Él que no llora, no mama.*” Or, loosely translated: “The one who doesn't cry doesn't get the boob.”

Getting that attention comes at a cost. Last year, Cisneros earned more than \$200,000 in contracts that specifically included lobbying duties. It might sound like a lot of money, but Cisneros said his clients get more than their money's worth.

Cisneros is quick to point out that many governments hire him to wrangle funding from other sources during all times of the year.

Cisneros has been at this game for 30 years. And several local governments pay tens of thousands of dollars annually to put that experience to work for them.

The town of Red River has awarded Cisneros contracts worth \$19,999 each year between 2004 and 2014. And each year between 2010 and 2014, the village of Questa awarded Cisneros contracts worth between \$37,015 and \$43,275. The town of Taos has hired Cisneros' company since at least 2004, and recent contracts have been for around \$35,000 a year.

During the legislative session, Cisneros says he steers projects proposed by local governments through the competitive and complex maze of Roundhouse politics. For his clients, Cisneros says he's pushing projects with the most "meat" — priority projects that are ready to go — and they usually get funded.

And even though it's not unusual for an important project to fall off the list or get vetoed at the last minute by the governor, he says the system is mostly equitable.

"It's amazing to see that that system does work," Cisneros says. "But it's hard. And you have to have a lot of years [of] experience to be part of that system."

Not everyone is so sure that the existing capital outlay system actually puts money toward the projects that most need it, rather than those that are politically expedient.

Last year, the tiny village of Wagon Mound (population 314) hired Cisneros for \$24,000 to lobby at the Legislature and help secure other grants. The contract was equal to about one-tenth of the village's annual general fund budget.

"[Cisneros] has got a lot of political knowledge, knows a lot of people, a lot of senators and representatives," says Wagon Mound Mayor Laudente Quintana, in an interview with

The Taos News.

In previous years, Wagon Mound has seen hundreds of thousands of dollars in capital outlay funding for things like building a new senior center.

Last year, the village was asking for \$1.1 million for various projects.

In the end, it got just \$20,000.

Quintana said he was obviously disappointed. So he went to his senator and representative after the session to ask for their support the next time around.

But if he can go straight to the legislators, then why hire a lobbyist?

“That’s a good question,” Quintana said. “I don’t know why we need a lobbyist.”

“There must be some purpose because we have so damn many of them,” says Sen. Carlos Cisneros, D-Questa.

He says lobbyists like Cisneros are integral to local governments navigating the Legislature.

If a project is to win funding, someone like Gabe Cisneros needs to step up and answer questions or provide needed documents.

While county commissioners and town council members often visit the Legislature when it’s in session, the senator says they may not know about the politics playing out around them.

But Cisneros suggests the sway of lobbyists only goes so far when legislators are deciding on funding for infrastructure projects.

When asked if communities fare better when they hire someone like Gabe Cisneros, the senator said: “I don’t see them faring any worse because of a lobbyist.”

Despite the prevalent perception that Sen. Cisneros is related to lobbyist Cisneros, *The Taos News* was unable to find any direct familial link. Both downplay any personal relationship. Gabe Cisneros would only say he has a good, professional rapport with Taos County’s legislators.

But former state legislator Dede Feldman says friendly and even familial relationships do exist between lobbyists and legislators in Santa Fe. And those relationships often work to the advantage of the people or agencies that hire them.

“Since each individual legislator gets to designate the money for their own local projects, it makes sense [for towns] to get a lobbyist who knows them, is related to them and has some pull with them, to actually tell them where that money should go,” Feldman said.

Feldman said lobbyists can be useful, especially those who know how the system works in Santa Fe and where to find the money. They can also keep elected officials up to speed on projects in the months when the Legislature is out of session.

But Feldman said her objection to that system is that it gives those lobbyists with a personal relationship to legislators an unfair advantage over other lobbyists, not to mention the general public.