

Budget cuts could impact schools, roads

By J.R. Logan and Cody Hooks, jrlogan@taosnews.com, chooks@taosnews.com

The Taos News, 10/6/2016

As state lawmakers scramble in Santa Fe to fill a \$600 million shortfall, Taos County school districts are terrified that they'll be asked to cut into already lean budgets.

Taos Schools Superintendent Lillian Torrez told *The Taos News* that, at this point, she's seriously looking at auctioning old furniture and selling honey on the side of the road to make ends meet.

"There's just no way this can work," Torres said of proposed reductions in school funding.

Declining oil and gas revenues are a big part of the state government's current budget crunch. Several days into a special legislative session, House Republicans have rejected anything resembling a tax increase, and Gov. Susana Martinez has said she would veto a proposal that includes higher taxes. That hard line means legislators are having to cut their way to a balanced budget, and education appears to be in the crosshairs.

Differing proposals

A proposal from the Democrat-led Senate would slash public education by an estimated \$96.4 million statewide. A counterproposal from the Republican-led House would mean \$90.4 million in cuts. That does not include reductions in higher education funding.

Since 2013, the Taos school district has seen its annual budget slip from \$21.4 million to \$18 million.

Now, bills pending at the Legislature could cut up to \$416,000, though it's impossible to know what the actual impact will be until legislators finish hashing out a deal.

In Questa, current proposals could mean a loss of \$65,000, said Questa Superintendent Valerie Trujillo. "We are most definitely taking a hit and we cannot afford any cuts — not even if it's a dollar," Trujillo said.

Administrators around the state aren't taking the proposed cuts in silence. About half of New Mexico's superintendents descended on the capitol on the second day of the special session to lobby for preserving school funding.

At UNM-Taos, Executive Director Marty Hewlett said the current proposal would slash their funding by 8 percent, though the actual figure remains a moving target. "We're just going to have to grit our teeth and wait for it to happen," Hewlett said in a phone interview Oct. 5.

Hewlett pointed out that the university has been under a hiring freeze, and has been prohibited from filling vacant positions in order to free up money in the budget and hopefully avoid layoffs. But Hewlett noted that the freeze has already strained some departments and he's concerned that he won't be able to fill those "critical" vacancies.

Sen. Carlos Cisneros, D-Questa, vice chair of the Senate Finance Committee, said no one is eager to cut education funding, but without raising taxes, the state has few options.

“Unfortunately, education in this instance takes a hit,” Cisneros told *The Taos News* Oct. 5, a day before the Senate was expected to reconvene. “They’re in a vulnerable position.”

With a showdown between the House and Senate expected later this week, Cisneros said the final outcome was a “crapshoot.”

Hits to infrastructure

While the fate of education cuts remains uncertain, legislators have agreed to clawback \$90 million for infrastructure projects that had been allocated funding through the state capital outlay program years ago. The state took money from projects that it determined had not taken significant steps to spend the funds.

Cisneros originally told

The Taos News Sept. 30 that Taos County could lose up to \$470,000 earmarked for infrastructure projects. But the final bill, passed by both the House and Senate and awaiting the governor’s signature, included \$216,000 for Taos County projects.

Those projects include:

- \$50,000 for new hangars at the Taos Regional Airport
- \$40,000 for a new water well in Questa
- \$26,000 for improvements to a domestic water system in Lama
- \$25,000 for improvements at the Talpa Community Center • \$25,000 for renovations at Taos Plaza
- \$50,000 to buy water rights for the village of Questa Taos Town Manager Rick Bellis said in an email that money for the new hangars could not be spent until a master plan at the airport is complete. The money for Taos Plaza was supposed to be funneled through the Taos Arts and Cultural District, but was tied up in red tape.

Taos County Manager Leandro Cordova said the county government managed to avoid a big loss of capital outlay money because it had been aggressive about spending it.

The loss to Questa, however, will be more significant, especially the \$40,000 for a new well and water storage. “That one hurts,” said Village Administrator Loretta Trujillo in an interview Oct. 4. Trujillo said it couldn’t spend state funds until it cleaned up past financial reporting problems. She said the village was just at the point of putting the well project out to bid. Now it looks like that won’t happen.

Also included in the infrastructure bill was a \$22.5 million cut to the Department of Transportation. The bill describes the cuts as “State Road Fund Road Improvements.”

Taos was recently promised more than \$11 million in improvements to Paseo del Pueblo through most of town. It’s not yet clear if the budget crunch will impact that project or others in Taos County.

“The details on which state routes are affected by the cuts have not been determined through coordination with [Department of Transportation] management,” wrote Rosanne Rodriguez, a spokesperson for the agency, in an email to *The Taos News*.



Lawmakers at the Roundhouse in Santa Fe are in a special session to determine how to shore up a \$600 million budget deficit.

Shutterstock

Copyright (c)2016 The Taos News 10/6/2016