

Who got the money?

Lawmakers hand out millions for water and building projects in Taos County

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Katharine Egl/The Taos News Children enjoy story time at Questa Public Library's 10th birthday party in 2018. The library received \$580,000 from state lawmakers in the 2019 session to expand.

When the legislative session was all said and done, Taos County received about \$22.5 million in “capital outlay” money, those funds that are earmarked for projects such as new public buildings and repairs to acequias.

“We have never done this well in Taos County since 1985,” said State Sen. Carlos Cisneros (D-Questa) in a March interview. New Mexico is in the midst of an oil and gas boom, and that’s padded the state coffers.

While the capital outlay system has been criticized in the past – namely because it can take years for municipal governments and public entities to cobble together enough money to follow through on a project – much of the money allocated in 2019 will go a long way toward getting projects completed.

The single largest allocation from capital outlay in the county was \$3.2 million for the Taos County Veterans Cemetery.

“All our veterans are so excited, because they want to be buried in their hometown where their family can visit their gravesites,” said Francis Cordova, a military veteran who has lobbied local, state and federal officials for the cemetery for years.

The cemetery will be located on County Road 110, west of the golf course. Taos County officials started on the project in earnest in 2014. The project was passed over by former New Mexico Governor Susana Martinez for a state-level veterans cemetery program, but the county took the lead on making it a reality nonetheless.

About five acres have been cleared and a fence now wraps the property.

The county still lacks about \$1 million, based on the original cost projections. But Taos County Manager Brent Jaramillo is undeterred. “We’re just going to work around this budget,” he said, saying the county should be able to make significant progress on the cemetery.

“Hopefully we can spend that money and do what we have to do,” said County Commissioner Gabriel Romero, whose district includes the cemetery.

On the north end of the county, Questa received \$580,000 to expand its library. “We are thrilled,” said library director Sharon Nicholson. “As soon as we got this library launched 11 years ago we figured out it wasn’t going to be big enough. We’ve been working this whole time ... to expand our library.”

The money should cover the majority of costs, she said. Once completed, the expansion will more than double the square footage of the library, which is an arm of the village of Questa.

Red River was handed \$1 million to increase the stock of long-term rentals in that town’s strapped housing market.

The town is under contract to buy two hotels that have been on the market, said Red River Mayor Linda Calhoun.

“It’ll give us 30-plus housing units to add to the inventory. Once [we] complete the sale of that, then we’ll rent those out to locals and to people who want to live and work in Red River,” she said.

Calhoun noted that the rooms will not be affordable housing, but rented at market value. She said the town is hoping to have the rooms renovated and up for rent by September.

“We’ve struggled with [housing] for years,” she said. “This will go a long way.”

Taos Ski Valley got about \$1.6 million to expand its water treatment plant and to develop the Gunsight Spring into a new water source for the village’s water system.

Taos Pueblo received \$1.8 million to construct a multipurpose building, while the town of Taos received \$586,000 for projects at the regional airport, such as a new hangar.

The University of New Mexico-Taos got \$1.5 million of capital outlay money.

“We believe that this capital project outlay will provide a safe and welcoming campus environment to support students’ access and success,” said UNM-Taos CEO Patrick Valdez.

The money “will allow for the repair, upgrade and construction of our campus and facilities infrastructure, including improvements for parking lots, roadways, lighting and safe pedestrian and regulatory safety upgrades,” he added.

On the south end of the county, Picuris Pueblo received about \$4 million for various projects, including renovations to the current administration building and its water system.

Of the dozens of Taos County projects that the state Legislature allocated money toward, only one was vetoed by the governor — \$25,000 for a new water tank for the Ojo Caliente mutual domestic water system. It was the smallest allocation out of all the capital outlay projects that made it through the Legislature.

“That’s news to me,” said Glenn Lovato, administrator and operator of the water system.

The current 50,000-gallon water tank was installed in 1984, he said. “We had divers go in there to see the wear and tear on that,” he said, and determined the system needed a new tank.

All told, Lovato needs a quarter-million dollars for a new tank and the land to put it on.

Back to the old criticism of capital outlay: it’s going to take many more years before Lovato has the money in hand for the new tank.