



A message to Governor Martinez and the New Mexico Legislature: Don't balance the state budget on the backs of counties

As state budget talks continue, New Mexico's counties are asking Governor Martinez and the New Mexico Legislature to take a careful look at the services provided by county government, and especially those programs financed by funds that are now being depleted.

We understand the difficult choices the Legislature is facing, but New Mexico's counties request that the executive and legislature identify and find alternative sources of revenue to make up the state's revenue shortfall. If the state budget is balanced on the backs of local governments, the citizens of New Mexico will suffer the consequences.

Many counties are struggling mightily to balance their budgets, and having to make do with less.

In fact, over the last several years, the state has forced many counties to raise taxes as a direct result of the state's reduction in services and funding, and placing more obligations on local government.

While the state has not directly raised taxes in many years, counties have been forced to raise taxes to continue providing essential services to their residents. This is not a healthy or sustainable situation.

Counties and municipalities have stepped up to the plate, and will continue to do so. However, the state needs to do its share too.

To balance the budget over the last several years, the state has swept all fund balances in the county E-911 fund which pays for emergency medical equipment, the county local DWI fund which provides a broad spectrum of services involving DWI prevention and treatment, the Fire Protection Fund which helps finance fire and emergency services equipment and vehicles, and the Law Enforcement Protection Fund which provides for law enforcement equipment and services.

These funds are used by county governments to provide critical public safety services, leaving counties with a draconian choice: cut critical services or raise taxes to pay for them. This has been necessitated by the state's unwillingness to raise taxes at a state level.

County government has a direct and substantial impact on peoples' lives in New Mexico, representing every citizen in the state. Counties provide the most vital services for the health, safety, and welfare of their residents:

- Maintenance of approximately 30,000 miles of roads (more than the state and municipalities combined)
- Primary law enforcement coverage through each county's sheriff's office
- Fire and emergency medical services
- Comprehensive anti-DWI programs that include treatment, screening, enforcement, and prevention
- Operation of adult and juvenile detention centers
- Indigent health care services including substance abuse and behavioral health counseling, senior services, and primary care
- Administration of local, state, and federal elections
- Assessment of real and personal properties and tax collection
- Emergency E-911 dispatch services

In addition, counties are saddled with some very significant unfunded mandates. They are responsible for:

- housing the state district courts (as well as providing court security), state district attorney offices, and state public health offices
- paying the state approximately \$28 million to help fund the state Medicaid program and approximately \$23 million to fund the Safety Net Care Pool for uncompensated care and Medicaid rate increases for hospitals.

New Mexico's counties are well aware of the Governor's pledge to reject any tax increases. However, that does not mean that counties should be forced to bear the burden for increasing taxes. Please do not continue to rob Peter to pay Paul!



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