

ANOTHER BUSY INTERIM FOR LEGISLATORS

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The interim committee hearings for legislators are just now beginning. All in all there will be in excess of 200 hearing days prior to the next session in January of 2009. These hearings will take place in approximately 80 cities and towns all over New Mexico. This gives legislators a chance to visit face to face with folks outside of our individual districts who are directly impacted by our policy decisions.

Here is a brief update on what is happening with several of these key issues;

- **Health Care** – The Governor’s initiative to provide universal healthcare coverage failed to pass during the last legislative session. The bill underwent significant changes during the committee process and did not gain the traction necessary to make it through the legislative process. The Governor has promised a special session to address healthcare, however, we have yet to hear of a definitive date for such a session. As we continue to discuss this important issue I believe we must look at the healthcare system as a whole and take into account the costs versus the benefits of changes to the current system. As legislators it is important that we weigh the effect of policy changes on the overall quality of our care, rather than focusing our attention solely on one aspect of the healthcare formula.
- **Transportation Shortfalls** –As federal funding for highways and bridges has been on the decrease and with the State reaching the statutory cap for the debt service on the GRIP I bonding package, we continue to see shortfalls in transportation funding for our State. It is vital to our economy that we maintain and upgrade our infrastructure. Well maintained and improved roads not only constitute a quality of life issue for us all, road projects bring jobs and economic development opportunities to all parts of the state. There will be a great deal of discussion this interim and during the next legislative session on ways to bolster highway funding. Many of these discussions will center on “revenue enhancements”. This is a term often substituted in the legislature for raising fees and taxes. As I have said before, I do not believe that this is the best way to improve road funding shortfalls. I believe the answer is to prioritize. In my opinion it would be prudent to concentrate on basic transportation needs and improvements, and to look to other areas for existing tax revenues if needed; such as transferring the state’s existing motor vehicle excise tax annual proceeds (approx \$120 million per year) to the state road fund rather than to the general fund. I also believe that public transportation is important, but not at the current price tag while other critical transportation projects and needs go unfunded or under-funded.
- **Property Tax Inequities** – Several legislators, including myself, are working on the current property tax inequities in New Mexico. When the legislature passed the 3% cap on residential property tax assessments back in 2001 it helped to curb large annual increases for existing homeowners. However, the way the legislation was drafted the cap is removed and reinstated at the higher price at the time a home is sold. This results in neighbors paying significantly different property taxes on similar homes. Homeowners are often times uninformed of this clause prior to closing on a new home. This can result in surprisingly large property tax bill increases after closing and can also put homeowners in a financial pinch. The legislative fixes focus on two main areas; better information to homeowners prior to closing and equalization of the inequities without raising taxes for those currently under the cap. I am hopeful that we will have the momentum to pass meaningful legislation during the next regular session. I am confident that there will be a great deal of discussion between legislators during the interim.

As always, please do not hesitate to contact me via e-mail at richard.berry@nmlegis.gov or at my home at 293-1130 if you have any ideas, concerns or questions, or legislation that you would like to discuss. As always, I appreciate the opportunity to serve District 20.