



Governor, N.M. Won't Settle For Gridlock

By Bill Richardson New Mexico Governor

As a candidate for governor six years ago, some of my earliest and harshest critics came from the old guardians of the status quo who opposed my income-tax cuts and complained loudly that we couldn't afford bold changes.

This is what I heard: You can't cut taxes; you can't touch the permanent fund; you can't make DWI penalties too harsh; you can't invest in commuter rail; you can't shift money from administration to the classroom; you can't reform the capital outlay process. They were wrong then, and they are wrong now.

Voters have rejected that entrenched way of thinking. They were tired of partisan bickering and the gridlock in Santa Fe that kept New Mexico at the bottom of so many lists.

Nevertheless, I wasn't elected to do battle with the Legislature. I was elected to get things done. That meant working with legislators and representing ordinary New Mexicans who wanted real change from their state government.

To some extent, I learned to appreciate my annual debate with these so-called budget watchdogs. It was my job to convince them that we could invest in New Mexico's priorities, like education, health care and modern transportation, while still being fiscally responsible.

And while we have always had our differences, we have been able to resolve those differences in a professional manner and make major changes that have allowed us to move New Mexico forward.

We just completed a special session of the Legislature that can be described as acrimonious, at best. I am an optimist, and I am pleased that we produced modest financial relief for New Mexico families who are struggling to pay high gasoline prices. And I am encouraged that we're making progress in providing access to health care for kids.

Despite dire predictions about our financial health, the political rhetoric from some senators ignores the fact that we have more than \$600 million in cash reserves — 10 percent of our overall budget — that I insisted we keep on hand to protect us in emergencies or to cover any shortfalls.

The hand-wringing over oil and gas prices is understandable, but remember, we're talking about how much of a budget surplus we'll have above that \$600 million reserve level — not whether we'll have a surplus.

Professional economists think we'll have a one-time \$208 million surplus this year and nearly \$400 million next year. Combined with our reserves, that's \$1 billion more than we're currently spending on state government. My philosophy has always been if we have a surplus, we should give a responsible portion of that back to New Mexico families.

Despite our progress during the past six years, I am disappointed by the confrontational tone of the debate over these and many other issues. I made a concerted effort this session to ignore personal attacks that I knew I would hear from certain senators. I limited my public statements and focused on behind-the-scenes negotiating with legislative leaders to try to forge meaningful compromises. For the most part, we accomplished that.

Yet, the media focus was on the political pot shots from the usual suspects in the Senate who are more intent on criticizing me, rather than helping New Mexico families and moving the state forward.

I have already met with my Cabinet and we are looking ahead to the 60-day legislative session that starts in January. We are not slowing down. We are developing an aggressive package of initiatives designed to continue to move New Mexico forward. I am determined to work with the Legislature and avoid a return to the gridlock that prevents progress.

We should be proud of what we have collectively accomplished during the past six years. But we have more work to do. New Mexicans don't care about turf battles in Santa Fe. They want action, not excuses.