

Pro-business, pro-labor, or pro-employee

Written by By Beth Blakeman Managing Editor
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Can the 2021 New Mexico legislature support all sides?

Chambers of commerce across the state are making telephones and Zoom cameras buzz as they confront some of the issues state legislators are considering.

Bill Lee, the CEO of the Greater Gallup Chamber of Commerce and Terri Cole, the president and CEO of the Greater Albuquerque Chamber of Commerce have joined forces to consider some of the details in about a dozen bills now under consideration in Santa Fe.

“Our chambers of commerce are united in their stance to be pro-business,” Lee told the *Gallup Sun*

March 1. “There is not an ‘R’ or a ‘D’ before my name or after my name, but there is a ‘b’ and that means business,” Lee stated emphatically.

In considering some of the legislation being discussed at the Roundhouse, Lee and Cole have indicated unease.

Cole said two personalities appear to be rearing their heads in the 2021 session, one is pro-business and one is pro-labor.

Cole concedes that there have been some very positive efforts bringing short-term COVID relief to small businesses with grants and loans and badly needed help for hospitality and restaurant businesses.

But she expressed concern about as many as 11 bills that she believes will create a long-term burden on New Mexico establishments.

“COVID has created a horrible reality for small businesses. We’ve lost many of them in both cities [Albuquerque and Gallup],” Cole said. “We have told the legislature we can leave this session with an ability to thrive and be hospitable or we can become high cost, over-legislated

and extremely litigious.”

Lee and Cole take issue with eight bills in particular

HB 20 Healthy Workplaces Act

HB 38 Paid Family & Medical Leave Act

HB 110 Phased Minimum Wage Increase

HB 122 Health Insurance Premium Surtax

HB 248 Insurance Fee Changes

HB 148 Unemployment Contribution Rate Change

SB 211 Corporate Income Tax Rates

They also indicated they had some issues with SB 56 [New Personal Income Tax Bracket], SB 89 [Amend Personal Income Tax Brackets], and HB 291 [Tax Changes], because they say those bills would create higher personal and corporate income taxes.

Lee also mentioned HB 268 [Coronavirus & Workers' Comp].

He elaborated.

“If an employee tests positive for COVID, this bill automatically assumes they got it at the workplace – so you’re entitled to workers’ comp, unless the employer can prove that it didn’t come from there,” he said. “We think that is onerous and completely burdensome on our community.

“How is a small business owner supposed to prove that [the disease didn’t come from the workplace] with rights of privacy [in place]? It becomes untenable for the businesses to try and prove otherwise.”

In addition to the disagreement with some of the bills, Lee and Cole said they are facing another obstacle: Getting their voices heard.

Both chamber CEOs say that this year’s session with its virtual meetings, sometimes taking place simultaneously, can be difficult to attend, making it hard to insert opposing viewpoints.

“There has been a reluctance to include our ideas into these bills,” Cole said.

Nevertheless, Lee highlighted the support business has received from Sen. George Muñoz, D-Gallup, Rep. Harry Garcia, D-Grants, Rep. D. Wonda Johnson D-Rehoboth, and Rep. Patty Lundstrom, D-Gallup.

“Gallup and Albuquerque have come together to try to be champions for small business in New Mexico.” Cole said. “Fifty-four percent of employment in New Mexico comes from small business.

“New Mexico is the ninth most dependent state on small business for employment,” she stated.

“We feel that the interim sessions are the place to examine these things,” Lee said.

“We know that the intent for the bill is for good things.

“But there are unintended consequences [from the things] put into these bills. We would be willing to sit down and talk,” he said.

Cole noted some positive things about Governor Michelle Lujan Grisham; in particular, about her comments that some of the bills Cole opposes are premature.

But Cole and Lee are hoping to be allowed more input into the legislation.

Because of the virtual platforms put in place to keep safe while the session proceeds, the two are working strategically to get their views out, to attend different sessions, and to collaborate with the New Mexico Chamber Executives Association, which represents about 30 chambers across the state.

Even while the 2021 legislative session keeps people from communicating one-to-one, Cole remains committed to working on statewide policy “that is reasonable. We don’t have a no, never attitude,” she said.

“The last thing we want to do is surprise our constituents with a session with help on one hand and long-term costs on the other end,” Lee said. “We want to keep them apprised of everything and let them know that we’re fighting for them.”

But a sponsor for at least two of those bills gave the *Sun* her perspective on possible divisions in this year’s legislature.

Representative Christine Chandler, D-Dist. 43, talked about HB 20, the Healthy Workplaces Act, saying it would require all private employers to offer up to 64 hours of earned sick leave, also known as paid sick leave per year and it doesn't carry over from year to year.

She is also a sponsor of HB 38, the Paid Family & Medical Leave Act.

"I can't think of anyone who cares about workers being in opposition of the bill," she said. "How is it not beneficial to a small business to ensure that someone who is sick [does] not come to work?"

"Doesn't that also benefit the co-workers?" she asked. "What about members of the public who might be coming into these businesses?"

"I think it's short-sighted ... It ensures that people are not coming into work sick," Chandler said.

Although it was not mentioned by Lee or Cole, Chandler brought up another bill she is sponsoring, HB 11, the Grant & Permanent Fund for LEDA [Local Economic Development Act] Projects.

She emphasized that HB 11 provides up to \$200 million in grants for small businesses impacted by the pandemic.

We are not pro-labor or anti-small business she said. "We are pro-employee."

These three people are passionate about at least two different points of view.

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