

Infrastructure shapes priorities for the 2024 legislative session

Written by By Holly J. Wagner Sun Correspondent
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The region's champions began descending on Santa Fe this week to lobby for funding at the state's month-long legislative session, which started Jan. 16.

It's an annual ritual of supplication, as local officials and business leaders go with their hands out seeking money for priority projects. Local governments depend on state funding for many local infrastructure projects, which sometimes opens the door to federal matching funds.

The City of Gallup has a tiered list of items it needs, many of them water related. The top tier is large capital projects, starting with \$15 million for wastewater treatment plant improvements and \$12 million for a reverse osmosis system.

While the description "toilet to tap" will need some workshopping to get most consumers on board, Interim City Manager J.M. DeYoung believes communities across the Southwest will have to find ways to make wastewater clean enough to drink.

"The governor did request a lot of money, \$500 million from the federal government, to try to do reverse osmosis on brackish water or water used in fracking. We want to see if that is also a possibility for our area with our effluent. The purer the effluent, the greater the opportunities for reuse," he said.

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That may be further into the future, but for right now the city also wants \$3 million for another well to tide it over until the Navajo-Gallup Water Supply Project begins delivery, which is projected around 2029. Then there's \$2 million for replacement water and wastewater lines and \$1.5 million for a well pump assembly to deliver the water.

GALLUP MUNICIPAL AIRPORT

The city is asking for \$25 million to overhaul the Gallup Municipal Airport terminal to accommodate larger planes for passenger and cargo service.

"We have passenger service now. We are very interested in pursuing a Foreign Trade Zone and using our rail spur and connecting that with our airport," DeYoung said.

OTHER PROJECTS

Some of the ongoing projects that citizens notice most need funding: The city is asking for \$860,000 to put artificial turf on the fourth field at the Joe Vargas Veterans Sports Complex and \$500,000 for ongoing road maintenance in the city.

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The city supports a proposed change to how motor vehicle excise tax revenue pays for state and local road infrastructure funding.

“Right now 60% goes into the state general fund, 22% goes to the state road fund and 18% goes into local transportation project funds,” DeYoung said. “We’re asking them to allocate 60% to the state road fund and 40% to the local transportation project fund. This would free up a lot more money for infrastructure for roads.”

It would generate about \$140 million for road infrastructure statewide.

The city plans to support legislation that would expand workers compensation coverage into retirement for injuries or illness that result from work, and asking for change in the health premium tax to expand coverage for medics.

The state set up a public safety radio network to keep communities connected even if the local capability goes down. The cost ranges from \$20 to \$30 a month per radio and those costs have been passed on to local communities. Gallup is among cities that are asking the state to pay those bills.

Finally, the state charges local governments a fee to administer their taxes, and cities think it’s too high.

“It generates about \$50 million for the state,” DeYoung said. “The Tax and Revenue Department’s entire budget is \$65 million. Local governments are paying for 85% of their budget. We think they should lower that or bring the services up.”

COUNTY BRIDGES BECKON

Ask McKinley County Manager Anthony Dimas for his funding priorities and there's a good chance he'll say, "roads and bridges." This year is no different as the area's aging infrastructure wears out bit by bit. Many of the county's bridges are Vietnam-era military surplus.

The county is asking for \$6.6 million for bridges: \$3.3 million for the Annie Clanni bridge, which the state condemned in November. It connects Bread Springs (Baahaali) to the wider world; and another \$3.3 million for the last bridge on the Superman Canyon corridor.

"We're almost done with that corridor and ready to move to another corridor," Dimas said wearily.

Another important road project is extension of County Road 1. The \$1 million Dimas is seeking would let the county link Carbon Coal Road with a loop so motorists can go from the north side of town to the west side without going through neighborhoods.

Nearby, the county owns two parcels of land, one of 40 acres about a mile from U.S. Highway 491, plus another 640-acre parcel about four miles from the first, that the county wants to turn into an industrial park. The ask is \$5 million to put in utility infrastructure for it.

Dimas is also asking for \$4.5 million to renovate the RV Park at Red Rock Park. The project is in the design phase now, thanks to a tourism grant from the state.

"The decades-old facility isn't made for 40-foot campers with sides that pop out," Dimas said.

CHAMBER MEANS BUSINESS

Although the session is mainly focused on budget matters, there is a mechanism for the governor or House to bring in policy matters, Gallup McKinley County Chamber of Commerce Executive Director Bill Lee said. The chamber is concerned about a Family Medical Leave bill that has failed in the last two sessions but is on the call to return unchanged for another try.

Last year, it was Senate Bill 11.

“We are not opposed to paid family medical leave, just to that terrible bill,” Lee said.

It’s possible a business-backed family leave bill will be proposed this year in response. The chamber is part of a coalition with the New Mexico Restaurant Association and others “to fight the bad bill and support the good bill.”

Another bill coming back for another try would impose a 25-cent tax on alcoholic beverages. The chamber opposes that and any other new tax.

“We are against any new tax that the legislature wants to propose,” Lee said. “The \$3.8 billion in surplus again this year would indicate to us that there is no need for new taxes of any sort on personal or corporate incomes to be put on the business community or the citizens of New Mexico.”

Oil and gas revenues have built up the reserve, he said, and the state would be more prudent to put something – specifically about \$1 billion, or 30% of the surplus – aside for a rainy day.

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The chamber is also opposing an environmental rulemaking that would force dealerships to sell only electric vehicles within five years. The chamber wants to leave EV adoption to consumers.

“We think about our neighbors on the Navajo and Zuni reservations and throughout rural New Mexico who don’t have the infrastructure to charge these vehicles. If you live in Yatahey, I don’t know that there’s a lot of charging stations out there. Or in Window Rock or Prewitt,” Lee said. “Let’s be realistic about this.”

On a brighter note, Lee will be looking for \$5 million to spend on celebrating the Route 66 centennial. He chairs the Route 66 committee that would distribute the money to eight of the state’s Mother Road communities.

“Tourism is a shining star among state departments,” Lee said.

Additional items are likely to come up at a chamber board meeting later this month.

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Sun Correspondent