

Editorial

# All governments should follow Mora's example

We would like to commend Mora County for fully collaborating with forensic auditors and state officials to help expose the misuse of tax payer funds between the former chief of the Mora Volunteer Fire Department and his daughter, who was the former payroll and payments clerk for Mora County. A special audit was ordered by the State Auditor's Office in February 2019 and the findings concluded up to \$335,000 of taxpayer money was misused between July 1, 2013 and June 30, 2018.

Mora County Attorney Michael Aragon told the Optic, "This was a big wake-up call for all of us." No doubt, this scandal shook up the whole community but it should also be viewed as a wake-up call to other municipalities. Mora County's efforts to resolve this corruption needs to become precedent for all local governments facing these challenges.

Once the alarms had been sounded, it prompted Mora County administration to immediately disclose the alleged embezzlement to the State Auditor's Office, instead of sweeping it under the rug. They chose the path to maintain transparency no matter what the findings may have revealed and this is the correct way governments should operate. Government funds belong to the people, not to the people that manage them.

Realistically, corruption at this scale is likely to be more prevalent in smaller communities. Small governments are more susceptible to corruption because they have a smaller workforce which results in oversight and enforcement to suffer internally. It can also be extremely difficult to get the attention from county and state officials to look into these matters without an extremely alarming complaint of egregious misconduct.

Even though Mora County operates with very few employees, they still have been able to institute accountability measures at the local level. They instituted chains of internal controls for timesheets, purchasing, accounts payable and payroll. They also are working to maintain multiple ways of document retention to prevent documents from being eradicated. Not only will these actions help eliminate fraud and abuse, they will also increase the county's efficiency of operations, simplify procedures for audits and routine mistakes will be caught and corrected quickly. All employees and volunteers that had prior knowledge regarding these unethical actions were terminated, regardless of position. No excuses were made to keep these employees and ultimately, this action will be the one most beneficial for county going forward.

A full-fledged investigation, termination of all complacent employees and complete transparency are required in this situation to prevent a repetition of such acts. Failing to do so would be a dereliction of duty as governments serve the public. Since the special audit's findings could warrant potential criminal charges, we urge current District Attorney Richard Flores and District Attorney-Elect Thomas Clayton to follow through with the investigation to the fullest extent possible. May Mora County be the poster child for what should be done to prevent such corruption as well as set the guidelines for what actions to take when corruption like this does occur.

NOW THAT THANKSGIVING IS OVER, I NEED TO EXERCISE. BUT IT'S TOO MUCH WORK.

TO GET ON THE TREADMILL?



## Dispatch New Mexico

# New Mexico's political landscape now

Let's take a look at New Mexico's political landscape, post election.

I know I know, you're sick of politics, but this state still has a lot going on. We just had



Tom McDonald

a one-day special session to spend a bunch of federal relief money, and soon enough we'll find out if we're going to keep our governor or get a new one in time for the upcoming 60-day legislative session in January.

In this year's election, Democrats kept their tight grip on the state's executive, legislative and judicial branches. But the Republicans did win a big race in Congressional District 2, so there's life in this state's Grand Old Party after all.

Not that the Republicans had much of a say in the fly-by special session last week. Lawmakers either showed up or "zoomed" in, so to speak, to pass a pandemic relief package totaling \$330 million. It looked the way Gov. Michelle Lujan Grisham and her Democratic allies wanted it to look, and it's going to where they wanted it to go.

The federal CARES Act funds will go in a variety of directions: \$100 million will go into small business grants; \$120 million will go into one-time \$1,200 payments to about 100,000 unemployed New Mexicans who qualify; \$15 million is earmarked for emergency housing assistance; \$5 million goes into emergency food bank services; \$5 million more for direct assistance to low-income New Mexicans;

and \$10 million for contact tracing, testing and vaccine distribution. The rest of the funds, or about \$75 million, will go into the administration of all these services.

That's a lot of goodwill coming down the pike, and the Democrats will surely be the beneficiaries. Republicans, on the other hand, have little say-so, will get no credit, but they will do their best to heap copious amounts of blame on Lujan Grisham for anything and everything that goes wrong.

If you ask me, Lujan Grisham's biggest mistake has been in her one-size-fits-all approach to the state's COVID outbreaks, but that's something she's attempting to rectify with her new "Red to Green" approach to reopening. That's where all the state's counties are color-coded, based on 8 cases per 100,000 inhabitants and a 5 percent positivity rate in a county's COVID-19 test results over 14-days. Your county is green if you're under 8 cases per 100,000 people and have a test positivity rate of less than 5 percent; yellow if you're under one of those data points but not the other; and red if you over in both measurements.

The problem right now is that all but one of the 33 counties are red.

Clearly this is a reopening plan. We'll see how it works in the weeks ahead. We'll have a clearer picture of its success — and the success of the upcoming vaccine rollout — by the time the 2021 legislative session convenes on Jan. 19, when other issues like legalizing recreational marijuana will also take the stage.

But you can bet COVID and its economic impact will be

on top of the legislative agenda, perhaps to the point of pushing out other less-pressing issues. I'm as sure as I've always been that recreational marijuana will eventually be legalized in New Mexico, but whether that happens in 2021 remains an open question.

A bigger uncertainty, however, is whether Lujan Grisham will still be governor on Jan. 19, opening day for the legislative session. If she accepts a position in President Biden's administration — speculation I've read as of this writing is that she's in the running of secretary of Health and Human Services or the Department of the Interior — she'll be leaving the keys to the governor's mansion to Lt. Gov. Howie Morales, a state senator for the decade prior to his successful run for lieutenant governor in 2018.

Morales' credentials are in education (he was a special ed classroom teacher who earned degrees in bilingual special education and a Ph.D in curriculum and instruction), baseball (he's the youngest New Mexico high school coach to win 200 games) and politics (he went from Grant County clerk to senator to lieutenant governor).

He's been wanting the job for some time now, and he might just get it sooner rather than later. To that I say to Mr. Morales, be careful what you wish for. A most terrible year may soon be over, but 2021 promises tumult of its own.

**Tom McDonald** is founder of the New Mexico Community News Exchange, which distributes this column statewide. He owns and operates The Communicator in Santa Rosa. He can be reached at [tmcdonald.srn@gmail.com](mailto:tmcdonald.srn@gmail.com).

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