

# State must deal openly with budget woes

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(Photo: Sun-News)

Gov. Susana Martinez was absolutely right when she said recently that the state will need to call a special session of the Legislature to address a growing budget deficit.

However, the governor was absolutely wrong when she suggested that the special session should be little more than a rubber stamp to approve budget deals that have been worked out previously behind closed doors.

Martinez told the State Investment Council last week that budget negotiators on her staff have been working with lawmakers on the Legislative Finance Committee for weeks on ways to address a budget shortfall that is estimated to be between \$300 million and \$500 million, and that they may soon be ready to call a special

session, according to The Associated Press.

The template, she said, should be the special session called last year after legislators could not agree on a capital outlay package. All of the differences that had been aired so publicly during the final day of the regular session were resolved privately, without the public knowing who gave what and why.

"I'd really like to see this resolved, as we did (at a) special session over the capital, before we walk in, and it's a four-hour session," said Martinez, who at one time early in her first term had vowed to be the most transparent governor in state history.

This continues a troubling trend of secrecy that has plagued state government ever since the budget problems began.

First came the secret negotiations on the capital outlay fix. Then, when revenue numbers came in below projections this year during the regular session, the House and Senate finance committees both locked the doors and met in secret to make budget adjustment. Now, the governor is calling for more secret meetings for more adjustments

The New Mexico Foundation for Open Government, a nonprofit organization devoted to increasing transparency in state government, has had its hands full. The group has already issued a statement in response to the governor's plan.

"It has been suggested that party leaders may pre-negotiate solutions to the budgetary issues, and then rubber-stamp them in a very short session. These types of back-room negotiations would effectively shut the public out of the process. New Mexicans need to be able to participate, and not just read about the result in the newspaper," FOG said last week.

We understand that these will be difficult, painful decisions for lawmakers. There's no easy way to cut spending in an election year. Allowing the public into the process will increase the pressure on legislators and make the process a lot louder and angrier and messier. It would surely be much easier to huddle away in some secluded back office.

But open government demands messy, not easy.

And the pressure will come anyway. We feel strongly that higher education took the brunt of the cuts last time around, and should not get whacked again. But, we also understand that other advocates feel just as strongly about other state programs. And, cuts will have to come somewhere.

The New Mexico Constitution requires that the budget be balanced, so it's fairly clear that a special session will be required. But, it should be a real session with real debate about what is clearly a very real long-term problem for the state.

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