

LOCAL NEWS



Dems: GOP left public in dark on bills

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Posted: Friday, September 30, 2016 10:00 pm | Updated: 2:04 pm, Sat Oct 1, 2016.

By Steve Terrell
The New Mexican

Against a backdrop of political tensions in a rare election-year special session of the state Legislature, House Democrats accused the Republican leadership of keeping the public in the dark on legislation being considered.

House Democratic Leader Brian Egolf, D-Santa Fe, complained Friday afternoon that no bills — specifically the controversial crime bills backed by Gov. Susana Martinez — had been posted online by that time, and that the public wasn't properly informed about a House committee hearing on those bills.

“There has been no notice to the public online,” Egolf said. “There has been no notice to the public, period, that those bills are going to be considered today. ... As of right now, no one in the public has access to the death penalty reinstatement legislation, and that is pretty outrageous.”

Even before the session began Friday, political sniping had begun. Advance New Mexico Now, a political action committee associated with Martinez, began running ads touting her crime bills, saying “liberal politicians” have been soft on crime. House Democrats held a news conference two hours before the session started, in which Egolf and others said those crime bills were nothing but a “distraction” for political purposes.

Representatives of government watchdog groups said issues of transparency go beyond partisan politics.

“We are sorry to hear that openness is the first casualty of the session,” Susan Boe, executive director of the New Mexico Foundation for Open Government, told *The New Mexican* on Friday.

“It seems deliberately deceitful to the public,” Heather Ferguson, legislative director of Common Cause New Mexico, said in an interview. “They could easily have posted these crime bills days ago.”



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On the House floor, Rep. Bill McCamley, D-Las Cruces, said his constituents were being cheated by the delay in online postings about bills and committee hearings. “The bishop actually lives in my district,” he said, referring to Las Cruces Bishop Oscar Cantú. New Mexico’s Catholic bishops were some of the leading advocates who pushed for the repeal of capital punishment.

Scheduling a committee meeting only a half-hour after the floor session ended did not give the public enough time to review the crime bills, McCamley said. “My constituents should have a right to be able to examine these.”

The 21-page death penalty bill, House Bill 7, finally appeared on the Legislature’s website sometime after 2:30 p.m. Friday.

House Republican Leader Nate Gentry of Albuquerque said his office sent out a news release Thursday evening, not long after Martinez released her official proclamation announcing the special session.

“I have every confidence the press release was distributed to major media markets in Doña Ana County,” Gentry told McCamley.

After Democrats complained that they hadn’t seen the bills until Friday morning, Gentry said, “You have, and you voted on them.” Two of the three crime bills were considered in the regular session earlier this year.

These are House Bill 5, which would add crimes to the state’s “three strikes” law, making more offenders eligible for a life sentence, and House Bill 6, which would make intentional abuse of a child resulting in death a first-degree felony, no matter the age of the victim.

Egolf objected when House Speaker Don Tripp, R-Socorro, announced that the Legislative Council — which is made up of House and Senate leaders — would be meeting in his office immediately after the floor session. Egolf said there was no public notice for the meeting, and that it should be held in a larger space to accommodate the public.

Tripp responded by canceling the meeting.

Afterward, John Yaeger of the Legislative Council Service told *The New Mexican* that there were just a few routine housekeeping items that would have been discussed at the meeting. “We can do that later,” he said.

Boe said the Foundation for Open Government “recognizes that in special sessions, lawmakers operate on a fast track. However, the fact that a special session is being held is not a surprise. Both the governor and lawmakers knew a special session was needed to deal with the budget shortfalls. Yet it seems the session was announced at the last minute with no contingency plans in place once lawmakers arrived in Santa Fe.”

Her group has been calling since midsummer for more openness in budget negotiations among legislative leaders. “Now is not the time to shut the public out of the process,” Boe said.

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