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Rural health, water two good issues for legislative session

By Tom McDonald

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LAS VEGAS — The upcoming legislative session is shaping up as inevitably political and possibly productive.

Gov. Susana Martinez's back is against the wall. Her lack of legislative accomplishments going into the final year of her first term is a vulnerability, and she only has the upcoming "short session" to turn that around. Not surprisingly, she's already getting her legislative agenda out there, and if she prevails in getting enough of it passed, it could spell her reelection next November.

Two big small-town issues being advanced by Martinez have caught my attention. One is her proposal to sink \$112 million into water needs around the state. She wants to spend most of the money on infrastructure needs, but she also wants to ensure the water quality concerns are addressed, and that all communities have enough water for the years ahead.

That's a lot of money but it will seem too little once lawmakers gather around the public trough to divvy out the funds. For Martinez, however, it's easy to see how this can win her votes in small communities that benefit from the capital outlays.

Then there's her proposal to add nearly \$2.4 million to next year's state budget to increase the number of medical professionals in rural communities around New Mexico. The proposal seeks to boost the University of New Mexico's residency and training programs in New Mexico's small towns.

It's nothing new — New Mexico and other states have for decades offered incentives, especially to physicians, to get them to move into rural and underserved areas.

It's been an effective approach that benefits both the doctors that sign up for the program and the small towns that get their services. Paying one's way through med school is quite expensive, so offering to help a young doctor retire his or her student loans in exchange for two or three years in a small town is advantageous to all involved. The state wins by keeping rural people healthier, the physicians win by retiring their debts earlier, and the small towns win by, well, staying alive.

The fact is, small towns must have doctors, hospitals and health clinics if they are going to stymie, or at least slow, the population shifts from rural to urban. Most rural communities in New Mexico are seeing their young people move away because of a decline in economic opportunity, but older people are more stationary. Take away the hospital, the long-term care facilities, the clinics and the private medical practices and some small towns could turn into ghost towns.

Without localized health care, even the old folks are inclined to move to where the services are available.

Hospitals all over the state are making headlines because of quality-of-care, financial and management concerns. There's a debate in Grants over whether Cibola County should continue to run its own hospital or turn its management over to an outside entity. Clayton is wrestling with quality-of-care concerns as well as the fiscal viability of its Union County facility. Holy Cross Hospital in Taos County has cut staff and beds — it's downsizing. Those are just a few of the small-town facilities that are struggling.

Of course, there are exceptions — Lovington's Nor-Lea General Hospital, for example, is in the midst of an expansion (and so is the town) — but mostly, small hospitals are the odd-ones-out in a growing and thriving health-care industry.

A big ingredient to small-town hospitals' survival is the Sole Community Provider program, which reimburses hospitals for indigent care through the state's Medicaid program. This money is critical to keeping small hospitals fiscally solvent, but it doesn't appear to be a consideration in Martinez's rural health-care agenda. Instead, she's focusing on getting more doctors and nurses walking the floors of these hospitals.

For a lot of lawmakers, Martinez's rural health and water proposals will be hard to oppose. Still, the devil is in the details. It's easy to propose legislation, but it takes finesse and compromise to get the votes from lawmakers — and so far, after three legislative sessions, Martinez has demonstrated nothing of the sort. That's a big reason why her back's against the wall.

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