

NM groups seek public meetings for deficit talks

Artesia Daily
Press
Artesia, NM
Circ. 3900
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a7
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361117



SANTA FE (AP) — Labor, religious and social advocacy groups have formed an alliance to apply pressure to legislators and Gov. Bill Richardson's administration to open deficit reduction talks and consider raising taxes rather than cutting programs and services.

The goal of the talks is to develop a budget-balancing plan that can be considered in a special legislative session, probably next month. The state faces a budget shortfall of more than \$400 million. Another meeting is set for today between top administration officials and a dozen lawmakers.

A coalition calling itself Better Choices New Mexico wants the negotiations open to the public.

"They are making major decisions, cutting the budget by nearly a half billion dollars," Ruth Hoffman, director of Lutheran Advocacy Ministry, said Wednesday. "So people need to see what the options are and what's being considered."

Gilbert Gallegos, a spokesman for Richardson, said the governor has publicly announced his proposals for dealing with the deficit and will schedule office hours to meet with groups that want to offer ideas for balancing the budget.

"While the meetings of the working group are not open to the public, any proposals that result from those meetings will be publicly scrutinized before

and during a special session," Gallegos said in a statement.

Richardson does not plan to attend today's deficit reduction talks, according to Gallegos.

A legislative committee leader, Rep. Luciano "Lucky" Varela, said he doesn't object to opening the talks to the public as long as groups and individuals only listen to the proceedings and don't try to offer testimony or disrupt the meetings.

"Sitting in and participating are two different things," said Varela, a Santa Fe Democrat said chairman of the Legislative Finance Committee.

He said it's unlikely that tax increases will be considered during the special session because it "will just complicate the problem" of trying to pass a deficit reduction package.

To balance this year's budget, lawmakers and the governor are considering cuts in spending, canceling capital improvement projects and tapping into cash balances held by agencies and some programs.

However, Varela said the Legislature may consider tax proposals in January during a regularly scheduled 30-day session when lawmakers prepare a budget for the upcoming 2011 fiscal year.

More financial problems are expected next year as the state needs to replace part of the more than \$300 million in federal economic stimulus aid used for public schools and health care services this year.

Sarah Welsh, executive director of the New Mexico Foundation for Open Government, said the administration and legislators should follow the spirit of the state's open meetings law and allow the public to attend the deficit reduction talks.

"I would argue that if they are hammering out deals and making decisions that affect the budget certainly the law intends for those type of meetings to be open. Whether or not you would win in court, I'm not sure," said Welsh.

A law was enacted this year to open meetings of legislative conference committees, which reconcile differences between bills passed by the House and Senate. Welsh likened the deficit reduction talks to the important decision-making that can occur in a conference committee dealing with the state budget.

According to the coalition, more than 30 states have increased taxes or are considering revenue measures to deal with budget shortfalls.

Members of the coalition include the American Federation of State, County and Municipal Employees, American Federation of Teachers New Mexico; the New Mexico Conference of Churches; Conservation Voters New Mexico; the New Mexico Center on Law and Poverty, New Mexico Voices for Children and the Santa Fe Alliance, a small business group.

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Groups seek public meetings for deficit talks

By Barry Massey

The Associated Press

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Groups want open budget talks

In a letter to the Governor and Legislators, groups from across the political spectrum called on the state's leaders to open up current meetings on the state budget shortfall. Groups representing faith, small business, unions and advocates requested that the "legislative-executive working group" openly negotiate a solution to address the \$433 million budgetary shortfall for the current fiscal year.

Governor Richardson announced last week that he will call a one-day Special Session in October and form a "legislative-executive working group" made up of legislative leaders and executive branch representatives. The working group is meeting regularly to identify means to close the gap in the state's FY 2010 budget.

Earlier this year the Legislature passed a bill that opens conference committees to the public. Advocacy groups believe these budget negotiations should follow in the spirit of

that law and be open to all New Mexicans. Statewide organizations are requesting the legislative-executive working group host at least three regional public hearings - one each in Santa Fe, Albuquerque, and Las Cruces - where members of the public could be allowed to comment.

"We recognize this is an urgent matter and applaud the Governor and Legislature for taking swift action to address this fiscal challenge," said Gerry Bradley, New Mexico Voices for Children's research director. "However, we also believe that the people of New Mexico have valid concerns and good ideas on how to reach a solution to the current budget crisis. It is only responsible to take these ideas and concerns into consideration when making these important policy decisions."

The letter called for sufficient public and media notice of all working group meetings and for the meetings to be held in venues other than the state Capitol that will accommodate public attendance and participation.