

<http://www.abqjournal.com/news/state/342291nm04-24-05.htm>
Sunday, April 24, 2005

Grades Mixed On Gov.'s Record; Prominent New Mexicans speak out

By Andy Lenderman

Journal Politics Writer

Gov. Bill Richardson's achievements are being touted across the country, from conservative pundits praising tax cuts to other states following his lead on better benefits for the National Guard.

As his reputation grows nationally, the Democratic governor's popularity almost certainly remains high in New Mexico. No Republican, for instance, has so far even mentioned a possible challenge to his promised re-election bid in 2006.

But views of Richardson back home are also more mixed, and sometimes more critical, than national limelight usually reveals.

The Journal recently interviewed 16 prominent New Mexicans about the governor's record. Their answers, as well as a few previous comments, are recorded below.

Richardson, meanwhile, is busy talking about his agenda around New Mexico and in speaking engagements nationally. Many observers see the activity as closely linked to presidential aspirations for 2008.

Richardson admits his agenda has been ambitious, but insists it's critical to moving New Mexico up from the near-bottom of many economic and social rankings. He will have a long record to run on if he ever officially announces his anticipated bid for the Democratic presidential nomination a couple of years down the road: tax cuts here, fee increases there and big ideas launched in the education arena that have yet to play out.

New Mexico Democrats interviewed since the dust cleared from the legislative session that ended last month were happy with the governor's successes: income tax cuts and more money for schools, in particular.

Business leaders and the mayor of Albuquerque were among his biggest cheerleaders.

Republicans generally hammered Richardson for his spending and media manipulation. And state Sen. Rod Adair, R-Roswell, points to legislative analysis that shows combined tax and fee increases outweigh Richardson's tax cuts by more than \$170 million since the beginning of his term in Jan. 2003.

And some of Richardson's biggest supporters in 2002— teachers unions and public employees, and advocates for the poor— are questioning whether his spending plans can pay for both basic government needs and his tax cuts at the same time.

At the same time, Richardson continues to get high marks from conservative-minded national observers, including Rush Limbaugh, for New Mexico income tax cuts in 2003 and 2005. And the state government research group Stateline.org reported this month that 35 other states have followed suit on improved benefits for National Guard troops.

Richardson successfully sought legislation for the state to pick up the tab for life insurance policies for New Mexico National Guard troops, many of them serving in Iraq.

Richardson recently offered his own sunny assessment of his first three years in office.

He talked about income tax reductions for all New Mexicans, more money for schools, a better economy and cracking down on crime, including New Mexico's chronic DWI problems.

"Voters elected me and gave me a mandate based on a number of promises, which my administration, working in a bipartisan way with the Legislature, has accomplished," Richardson said in prepared remarks. " ... I'll leave it up to the voters of New Mexico to give me a grade based on those accomplishments."

Here's what a small cross-section of New Mexico observers had to say.

RICHARDSON GRADED BY NEW MEXICANS

- Albuquerque Mayor Martin J. Chávez praised Richardson's initiatives on education and tax cuts. "I think he's accomplished more in three sessions than I can recall any governor in my lifetime. I mean generally he said what he was going to do, and he's gone and done it. ... And I would rate him a smashing success so far."
- Allen Weh, chairman, Republican Party of New Mexico: "He is one of the shrewdest politicians this country has ever seen. And he's going to break the bank of New Mexico by the time he leaves office. We will have to dig out from underneath his fiscal mismanagement for years to come, and I absolutely feel sorry for his successor no matter who it is."
- Terri Cole, president, Greater Albuquerque Chamber of Commerce: "Strengthening New Mexico's economy is at the top of his list. ... He has focused on improving the conditions in New Mexico that strengthen the private sector. The business community likes what Gov. Richardson is doing. He's an independent thinker who doesn't get sucked into group think. I like that about him."
- Sen. Pete Domenici, R-N.M.: "Overall I think he's done a good job. He's a hard worker; from what I can tell he gets along with a lot of people from different vantage points— he seems to bring them together. So he's a unifier from the standpoint of getting people to see issues, to get issues resolved. And just overall, we find many areas of mutual understanding that we work together on." Meanwhile, there have been times when the senator hasn't appeared so appreciative of the governor. Domenici, chairman of the Senate Energy and Natural Resources Committee, blasted Richardson earlier this month for "mouthing off" about an energy policy bill the senator said didn't exist. And last week, he accused Richardson of "pure Earth Day posturing" when the governor announced a lawsuit against federal allowance of oil and gas drilling on Otero Mesa in southern New Mexico.
- Attorney General Patricia Madrid says she's served with two governors

"and they could not have been more different. Gov. Richardson is without a doubt an activist governor. His energy for policy knows no bounds. There have been times, however, when I have had to tell him no on a matter of law, and believe me, I much prefer it when we agree on issues. Gov. Richardson is a forceful ally."

- State Rep. Justine Fox-Young, R-Albuquerque: "Bill Richardson has mastered the art of saying one thing on national television and doing something else back home. He promised to cut taxes and then turned around and raised them for people in nursing homes, folks registering their cars and buying other necessities. I guess the money for the new Black Hawk (helicopter), private jet and a couple of chefs has to come from somewhere."
- State Rep. Greg Payne, R-Albuquerque: "I don't think New Mexico has changed that much since Richardson took office— although the governor has managed to put a very happy face on the status quo. Taxes have been manipulated here and there but spending has skyrocketed and our state bureaucracy remains one of the largest per capita in the country."
- Lonna Atkeson, associate professor of political science, University of New Mexico: "He's been a very conservative governor ... I think he's demonstrated that he's trying to center himself in the middle in terms of preparing for 2008 ... He's clearly creating a record that he can run on."
- Kay Monaco, director, New Mexico Voices for Children: Monaco's group says that programs like Medicaid, or health insurance for the poor, and basic education programs have been underfunded while Richardson's tax cuts have yet to produce any new high-wage jobs. "We need to invest in the social infrastructure. ... We're not making any progress. ... Personal income tax cuts are not going to help us make progress."
- Rodney Dunn, political director, University of New Mexico College Republicans: "It seems as though Gov. Richardson felt comfortable gutting our higher education budget, knowing that UNM President Louis Caldera and the UNM Board of Regents would pick up the slack in an unfair, oversized tuition increase."
- George Buffett, Republican national committeeman for New Mexico: Buffett, a longtime former state House member, gave Richardson a detailed report card in 10 areas. Examples included an A in politics— "For getting many business leaders and the trial lawyers both to support his run for governor." Buffett gave Richardson an F in constitutional law— "For requiring the regents at our universities to sign undated letters of resignation ..." And the governor received an F in logic from Buffett— "Richardson signed the bill for longer casino hours at the same time he says he is for helping problem gamblers."
- Christine Trujillo, president, New Mexico Federation of Labor: "I believe that Gov. Richardson is an effective politician. He has ambitious goals and seeks to achieve them ... His efforts to showcase New Mexico as a leader in education reform and economic development are noble and I believe authentic. However, in that effort he also creates situations that often cause division within the ranks of people he seeks to serve. Actually in his mind, I

would suggest, that he thinks we are either progressives or we are reactionaries."

- Anthony Marquez, executive director, Association of Federal, State, County and Municipal Employees, Council 18, said recent pay negotiations between the state and union members are a big problem. The union received a 1.75 percent pay raise and is among Richardson's biggest campaign contributors. "It has been pretty good until this last year," Marquez said of the governor's job performance. "He has given us collective bargaining; he has given us a pretty good contract with the exception of the last pay issue in the last contract ... We're hoping that he will come around and be of a bigger assistance to us next year."

- House Majority Leader Ken Martinez, D-Grants: "I respect Gov. Richardson. He has big political aspirations. New Mexico must succeed for him to succeed. ... I may not agree with every one of his policies, but those differences improve the debate and lead to better legislation. He might think that we as a legislative body deliberate too long, but ultimately he recognizes that we all dearly love the state we serve."

- Stephen Capra, executive director, New Mexico Wilderness Alliance: "He gets an A, no questions asked. He has been a conservation leader not only for the state of New Mexico, but he has been the lone and dissenting voice for defending our quality of life in the West. ... He's been a terrific leader and his stand on Otero Mesa is a model for other Western governors across the country."

- Mark Mathis, spokesman for Citizens Alliance for Responsible Energy, and public relations consultant: "Some think he's the second coming of Bill Clinton. Actually, I think that one was hatched by Richardson's media army— Team GuvZilla. Others believe he is GuvZilla. Ask any legislator who has dared cross him. In truth, Richardson has extraordinary political savvy. Any Democratic chief who can raise taxes, plunder an educational endowment and yet convince Rush Limbaugh that he is a tax cutter is one skilled hombre. I wish him well in his transparent run for the 2008 Democratic presidential nomination."
