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Advocacy Meets the Bottom Line

By Winthrop Quigley *Journal Staff Writer*

SANTA FE — At first glance, House Bill 261, like most legislation that braves the Roundhouse gantlet every year, is important enough but hardly revolutionary.

Its length — almost 140 pages — and its 33-word title that begins "Relating to unemployment compensation" make it a leading candidate for the least-likely-to-be-read-by-anyone-who-doesn't-absolutely-have-to-award in the 2003 session.

But in a legislative session remarkable for its unfamiliar collegiality, House Bill 261 stands out, for it was this bill that got Kay Monaco and John Carey to talk to each other.

Monaco, a lawyer, runs **New Mexico Voices for Children**. Carey, also a lawyer, runs the Association of Commerce and Industry. Voices for Children is usually called an advocacy group for children. ACI lobbies for business interests.

Or, as the prejudiced would put it, Voices is a bunch of naive liberals trying to bankrupt employers, while ACI is a bunch of soulless tightwads complaining about taxes all day long.

Monaco and Carey had seen each other in the capitol off and on for five years, sometimes when they testified on opposite sides of a bill. They met for the first time last October at a meeting convened by Loretta Armenta, who is not a lawyer but runs the Hispano Chamber of Commerce.

Both sides

Armenta has worked both sides of the street. She pushes a pro-business agenda for the Hispano Chamber, but for years she was with Parents Reaching Out, a group that advocated for the rights of disabled children.

"I was frustrated watching leaders in the business community with this idea that advocates go out there and advocate for causes without taking into consideration the financial impacts," Armenta said in an interview.

"The business community doesn't always understand the advocate's role and who they represent," she said. "On the other hand, the advocacy community didn't understand (that) if business doesn't have a good bottom line, it can't meet the needs advocates feel are so important."

After years of wishing the two communities would just sit down together, Armenta finally decided to convene a meeting last October. She invited ACI and Voices, Economic Forum, the Greater Albuquerque Chamber of Commerce, AARP, school board members and others.

Reluctance

"There was reluctance," Armenta said. "The business community said they don't understand, they just don't understand. The advocates said they're insensitive. If they don't walk in our shoes, they don't understand."

The players also found it hard to say no to Armenta and, however reluctantly, the meeting

convened.

"I was very pleasantly surprised at that first meeting," Carey said. "I was very surprised and pleased the social advocates acknowledged we have to grow the economy of the state and create jobs, and that a healthy, thriving business community was essential to their goals."

"It was the first time I heard business say our agenda matters to them," Monaco said. "Business owners in New Mexico have children. They care about hunger and poverty."

They were so pleased with the first meeting, Monaco and Carey agreed to a second, at ACI's offices, to see if there was specific legislation they could agree to support together.

They found what became House Bill 261. ⁴

Agreement

Its 130-plus pages boil down to this:

Over the years, New Mexico has accumulated a \$600 million trust fund that must be spent only to pay unemployment compensation to workers who lose their jobs. Studies show that is far more money than is needed to help the unemployed, barring a major economic downturn. House Bill 261 would increase benefits to the unemployed by \$28.7 million and reduce the taxes business pays into the trust fund by \$21 million.

Voices pushed a similar bill last year but without the tax cut for business.

The legislation, introduced by Rep. Mimi Stewart, D-Albuquerque, has cleared the House on a 63-3 vote. A similar bill has passed the Senate. Both await conference committee action.

They found other areas of agreement as well. Both groups oppose eliminating gross receipts taxes on food because they say it would cost the state revenue without helping the poor in any meaningful way.

Both support personal income tax reductions, though Voices supported the "circuit-breaker" concept that would cancel reductions if general fund revenue went too low after two years, and ACI wanted the tax cuts without conditions. The tax cut bill passed the legislature without a circuit breaker.

Tax cuts

"We agree on the concept (of tax cuts)," Monaco said.

"The fact we agree on the first two years (of tax cuts) is huge," Carey added.

The groups are building a level of trust now that makes negotiating the chaos of a New Mexico legislative session easier, they said.

They even finish each other's sentences once in a while.

"The legislature is not an environment," Carey began.

"That lends itself to calm discourse," Monaco said.

"You have to create the environment," Carey said. Monaco nodded.

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