**Summary: Town Hall with Senate District 6**

**NM Senator Bobby Gonzales**

**January 5, 2021**

Moderators:  Jay Levine and Christy Holden

Co-sponsoring organizations: Taos County Democratic Party, Taos United, Taos Progressive

Participants: 67 constituents (including the seven organizers)

**Bobby’s opening statement:** Want to emphasize a key word: Democracy. It is critical that we all recognize the entire process on how we arrive at decisions at all levels. He noted the historic elections in Georgia that were taking place today. He congratulated the organizers and participants, saying it is good to see Taos so well organized and “wanting to provide maximum information to everyone.”

**Block One: REVENUE GENERATION (for State and General Economy) AND TAX REFORM BILLS**

New Mexico’s dependence on oil and gas has long subjected our state to either economic booms or busts, the most recent of which hit a frightening low because of the pandemic.  Even before Covid, analysts and economists have been predicting a collapse of the fossil fuel industry within the next 5 years due to the lower cost of renewable energy, increasing costs of fossil fuel extraction and growing climate concerns. NM must find new revenue streams and diversify our economy starting now.

**Comprehensive Tax and Revenue Reform**

Question 1: The NM tax code has hundreds of tax breaks that benefit corporations and businesses, and a few that benefit the public such as the exemptions of food and drugs from the GRT. The majority of the corporate tax breaks have been shown over time to have had no benefits in terms of attracting new business, creating new jobs or bringing new money into the state.  Will you support the repeal of tax breaks to corporations that have no benefit to either the state and the public and have these corporations pay their fair share?

**Bobby:** Yes, most definitely. We need to have political will. The timing is right. We have had discussions all summer about the economy and taxes and diversification, especially around the Gross Receipts Tax (GRT), which is one of highest (in the country) and is unfriendly.

Question 2: There have been recent proposals to raise revenue by eliminating the tax exemptions for food and prescriptions despite the fact that these taxes disproportionately harm the poor. Proponents of this plan suggest that a “tax-refund” could be used to offset the burden on the poor, but many in our community are living paycheck to paycheck and cannot wait for a tax refund to put food on the table.

Will you pledge to oppose a food tax in any form?

**Bobby:** It is time to see how this can be revised, with view to assisting lower tier, and we’ve had discussions about it. We need to realize within other states, they do have a tax and that is one area we could do little bit different, especially with visitors to our state, who are not paying GRT. I would seriously see something that would not hurt the lower tier.

Question 3: Some cities in New Mexico have very high GRT. NM in general ranks around 15th for the highest sales tax. Shouldn’t we be working to lower GRT (or a lower sales tax) and find revenues elsewhere? This seems like it would benefit small business, low income and the public in general.

**Bobby:** Most definitely. We also have to see when rankings take place, what is the middle income for this state versus NM. In fact, we already have TSV, which is one of highest in state. And from there there’s more. And any time we go into that, we need to bring the Gross Receipts level lower, and also with seeing how this would do, we’re roughly one-quarter, roughly you’re looking roughly $125 million, and is it enough to offset, or how are we going to be able to have that amount going into local municipalities and counties.

Question 4: Our personal income tax (PIT) structure isn’t progressive; that is, income tax rates for higher income people are the same as for low income. As a result, the lowest income earners pay about 11% of their income in state and local taxes, but the highest earners pay as little as 6% of their income in taxes.

**Bobby:** We definitely need to change that. We have had 5 different legislative meetings on that. I can assure you this is one leg to level the playing field and have higher corporate earners pay their share.

Question 5: During the Richardson administration, we had changed the income tax for individuals. Lots of folks have talked about bring that back. Will you support leveling the field by increasing income tax rates on higher earners?

Bobby: The whole thing … During Richardson admin the whole part of doing it that way is that we were going to lure more industry and economic development and we’ve had enough years to see if it’s not working.

**Recreational Cannabis Legalization**

Question 6: Last year I asked what your position was on the bill before the NM legislature seeking to legalize recreational marijuana and you were uncertain saying you had to think more about it -- you did not have enough information. The evidence is overwhelming that the majority (70% in a recent survey) of New Mexicans want the bill to pass.

**Bobby:** I still need to have more answers in place. Just before this meeting, I was speaking with a water expert about water. To go into (marijuana) business, you need to have water rights. Do we do this over chili growers, pecan growers? That just isn’t right – we can’t put marijuana into competition. We also need to put more in place between the medical and recreational uses so they are not in competition. I supported the medical marijuana bill many years. But as my experience in education, especially as superintendent, it is sad to see substance abuse in young people. I’ve spoken with the Colorado Attorney General, and they still have lots of questions especially with impaired driving. In the San Luis Valley, on our border, they can see what is being done to that community – they cannot find anyone to work, with farms just sitting there. So I still have lots of questions and still will not support it.

Question 6a: But what about other water uses, like fracking?

**Bobby**: You bring out an excellent point.

**Public Bank for New Mexico**

The Association of NM Credit Unions’ 42 members supports the establishment of a State Bank.  The Independent Community Bankers Association opposes this proposal. Credit Unions see State Bank as a partnership for building infrastructure and funding packages for community needs. The Independent Community Bankers could also be partners in this plan, but see a State Bank as competition.  The 160 locations of Community Banks hold $12 Billion in assets.  A State Bank, funded at $50 million, could leverage $500 million in community directed loans for affordable housing, libraries, infrastructure such as broadband, and allow local banks to participate in the bonding for such projects.

Question 7: Will you join Sen. Steinborn and Lt. Gov. Morales in supporting legislation to create a public bank for New Mexico?

**Bobby**: I had an hour-long discussion on this earlier this morning. I support it, but was surprised the Lt. Governor does, because the Governor does not. I guess more work needs to be done? It is intriguing but we’re just at the beginning to get better legislation. But yes, I would support it especially if it provides services and gets rid of high-lending institutions.

Poll on Section 1:

**Block 2: Working Families and Citizen Benefit Bills**

**Expand the Working Families Tax Credi**t

Question 8: The Working Families Tax Credit provides a break for hard working, low-income families. Most of the money (97%) returned goes to families with children and most of it goes immediately back into the local economy. Increasing this tax credit would help families and our local economy get back on track. Will you vote for an increase in the Working Families Tax Credit?

**Bobby**: Most definitely.

**Health Security Act**

Question 9: Last year, the legislature passed a memorial to provide for a study of the impact of a proposed Health Security Act. This follows 25 years of preparation, studies and stakeholder meetings to address the necessity for a state health care policy. This year a proposal seeks 3 years of funding for the planning and implementation of a full roll-out of a NM Healthy Security Plan. Many people have lost their health insurance during the pandemic as result of losing their job. The response from the federal government has been inadequate. Are you in support of the New Mexico Health Security Act to guarantee health insurance to all New Mexicans and are you in favor of speeding up the process?

**Bobby**: Yes! That was my bill, my legislation! … It IS going to happen. The insurance companies come up with lots of different information, but would be a bit plus for our state.

Question 9a: Can it be sped up?

**Bobby**: We’re doing all we can …

(Offer of help.)

**Bobby**: Any help is appreciated.

**Food and Agriculture Omnibus Bill**

Question 10: In this time of climate change, a pandemic, economic fragility is evident in community food insecurity.  The Food and Ag Omnibus bill seeks to address NM’s agricultural infrastructure in a myriad of aspects, and to meet the food needs of New Mexicans. Do you favor this broad state-wide effort to increase food production and soil and water sustainability?

**Bobby:** Most definitely, for 2 years in a row. It blows my mind … at national level, #1 priority has been to support ranching and farming and you don’t hear it in the news. How are we going to feed 6.7 billion people around the world. Yet we don’t hear about it, why?

**Amendment to take an additional 1% per year from the Land Grant Permanent Fund for Early Childhood Development and Education**

Question 11: The first 3-5 years of a baby’s life is a once in a lifetime opportunity to either maximize the brain’s ability to learn or will limit a child’s learning potential for the rest of his or her life. We know high quality early childhood programs work to increase kids’ successes at every grade level, lower dropout rates, crime and drug use, and to lead to better paying jobs as adults. Some say that NM cannot afford to take additional money from the Land Grant funds, but **our failure to prepare every young brain to learn** is actually wasting much of the land grant money that we’re already spending and is keeping NM stuck at the bottom of the country in education. Will you vote to allow the public to decide on an amendment to the NM constitution to allow a 1% increase in distribution from the Land Grant Permanent Fund for Early Childhood programs?  If not, why not?  What other way to achieve enactment of this concept do you propose instead of this?

**Bobby:** This has been discussed at length for many years. First, will give short explanation. … Right now, distribution has to be at 5% and we’re not meeting it. So I would support efforts to bring it to 5%, maybe to 3.4% but still not above 5%. So if you change it to 6%, and we’re not even funding to 5%, we need to protect the fund, depending on the market. The other part is that we started at $150 million and we’re at $500 million, so there is a lot there already. Also, what safeguards do we have in place if there is a change in administration … and they take it for something else. So we need safeguard it.

***Poll for Benefits & Results***

**Block 3: Environment and Renewable Energy**

**Development and wildlife**

Question 12: Would Bobby support an acequia between Rockwell and Placita in southern Taos County. 1-1/2 miles long with 20 *parciantes*. Is in need of repair and further construction. Can money be allocated in the legislative session to repair the acequia?

**Bobby**: Yes. And I know that situation very well, but one of the things is that program is at level of $2.5 million. It’s a lot better than what we had years ago.

**Green Amendment**

Question 14: The Green Amendment begins the process to amend the New Mexico constitution to enshrine and make enforceable our rights as New Mexicans to a clean and healthy environment, including pure water, clean air, healthy ecosystems, and a stable climate, and to the preservation of the natural environment. Would you support such legislation?

**Bobby**: Yes, who doesn’t want this for everyone?

**Water Governance Reform Act**

Question 15: NM functions under water laws 109 years old; reform is long overdue. This comprehensive bill, with a step approach, modernizes the water grid, streamlines funding process, addresses water quality laws and tribal water issues. Do you support this bill to protect our most important resource?

**Bobby**: Yes, definitely, but I need to mention when it comes to water, if you have 29 attorneys in room, each one will have a different opinion. But still support it. In the Taos area, you have some of most knowledgeable experts when it comes to water, Taos Pueblo, in Des Montes, people like Paula Garcia. These people have invested their whole lives in protecting water. )

**Energy Transition Act Amendment**

Question 16: At present PNM can shift financial liability of up to $2 billion from the San Juan and Four Corners coal operations and their oil and gas investments to the ratepayer. This Amendment revises the language to protect the ratepayer from such liabilities.  Do you support this revision?

**Bobby**: Yes, most definitely.

**Methane Rule changes**

Question 17: Unnecessary venting and flaring costs our schools millions in revenue from oil/gas, ruining our air and harming our climate for future generations. Unlike other top producing oil and gas states, New Mexico has no requirements prohibiting methane waste and associated pollution from escaping. That constitutes an immediate health threat to all New Mexicans. State inaction and industry irresponsibility has led to dramatically increasing oil and gas production pollution levels. Will you support this change?

**Bobby:** I’m saying yes, but would like to have more research into it, but would say yes.

**Oil and Gas Bonding Increase**

Question 18: With the likelihood of more than 20,000 abandoned wells or vertical wells, due to the low international pricing of oil. Would you support an increase in bonds for all new wells, to protect the communities and environment of N.M, and ensure our citizens do not have to pay for the clean-up of irresponsible extractors?

**Bobby:** Yes of course. If you are in the business, you have to accept the responsibility.

**Produced Water Act**

Question 19: Amendments to last year's bill will explicitly protect against the use of fresh water in oil and gas well drilling, prohibit the use of fracking waste water (produced water) on roads and agricultural land, and make discharges and spills of produced water illegal. Would you support this bill?

**Bobby:** We have to do everything we can to protect our fresh water. And the other part of it is, we have to have policies in place for usage of water. Fresh water is a must you have to protect.

Question 20: **Local Choice Energy** will allow any city, municipality or tribe in New Mexico to pool their electricity demand and create a local utility which means local communities are in control of who owns our energy, where it comes from, and what happens with energy profits. Will you support the Local Choice Energy Bill?

(Some clarification about monopolies …)

**Bobby:** First of all, I don’t support monopolies. The more you can be in competition, definitely will support it.

Question 21: Following the 2018 victory by citizens in the Albuquerque Basin to prevent fracking completely -- which is highly damaging both to our land, our air and our water, outweighing any short-or long-term economic benefits. Will you support a fracking moratorium, which is going to be proposed by Senator Sedillo Lopez?

**Bobby:** We had a very long discussion on that today, and I don’t think you can say an immediate moratorium. There has to be some transitioning, because it would mean we are at ZERO for capital outlay. Where will the state come with $3 billion (to replace the gas revenues)? We’re not ready for that. I would support a gradual transition, but a complete stop? We would really be shooting ourselves in the foot. … This will take some planning to ensure law enforcement, judicial system, education – all those need a budget. We definitely want to have alternative resources to the state. Is not going to happen in a couple months or a year. Takes some very good planning.

Question 22: During last session, there was a bill to provide electric vehicle (EV) tax credits. What about tax credits for EVs (electric vehicles)?

**Bobby:** I’d have to go back and look at it. That’s one area I’m very sensitive, because I’m not saying versus regular gas and EVs. The whole point is, we need infrastructure, paving, signs, striping – that doesn’t come free. The more we take away from users, the harder it’s going to be for that department. And that department is already extremely strapped. But with EVs coming in, they have to pay their fair share. … Every time we go to the pump, we pay our fair share for tax. We need to look at an even, leveling field. (He added: In 1995, it was popular to repeal 6 cents of gas tax and we did and shot ourselves in the foot. And the worst part of it is, that we did the repeal, and two weeks later the industry went up 11 cents.) – Agrees that we should look at alternative ways to fund the DOT.

**51:25 - Poll & results for Environment and Energy (1 minute)**

**Lightning round, with “yes” or “no” answer requested**

Question 23: Comment on whether you support the decriminalization of the abortion statute from 1969?

**Bobby: It’s way overdue. That legislation, I foresee, will be Governor’s top priority and that it will pass this year.**

Question 24: As a concept, would you **Paid Sick Leave for workers?**

**Bobby:** Yes, I do. And I always feel you don’t let go of a loyal employee or someone who’s a good worker. They deserve that.

Question 25: **Paid legislature Question** -- New Mexico often ranks near the bottom of the good lists and at the top of the bad lists. One possible reason is the citizen legislature. Many good bills never pass due to the short time frame and sheer number of bills introduced, many legislators are unable to fully devote their time throughout the year to citizen concerns because they are working at their primary job, and many citizens choose not to run for office because they couldn’t afford the job. Should New Mexico join all the 49 states and finally pay their State Senators and Representatives for their services? And should New Mexico consider a longer legislative session to accomplish its work?

**Bobby:** It is way overdue and is on of bills I have sponsored over the years. It does discriminate in our state … is a hardship on employers too. We don’t even have staff. City councillors, mayors do get paid. Legislators were left out. We would have a commission to set the rates.

Question 25: **Predatory lending caps/Small Loan Interest Rate Cap Reduction**

Should there be a cap on small installment loans by storefront lenders of 36% instead of the current 175%? Possibly down to 36% as required by the military on their bases?

**Bobby:** Most definitely and would like to see it at zero or whatever the normal rates are.

Question 26: **Should we ban private prisons in NM?**

Should it be mandatory that New Mexican Courts sentence convicted persons solely to state run penal institutions?

**Bobby:** In my 25 years that I have been serving, this is probably the year I have been hit hardest, constituency-wise, and what I keep getting back and no facts, but just meeting with families, what they tell me is that they make every effort to keep them there, because it’s money … to me, that is wrong, thatyou’d go over the judicial system what is the penalty … Need to get more reporting and data, but would definitely would like to be out of private prisons.

Question 27: **End of Life Options.** Nine states have passed so-called Death with Dignity laws allowing terminally ill patients to be released from pain and suffering following a medical review and with the care of a physician.  Would you support such a bill for New Mexicans?

**Bobby:** Yes!

**1:45 Poll & Results for Lightning Round**

**Audience Questions**

**Question 28:** Siena Sanderson and Mark Goldman -- Access to affordable housing in Taos County and throughout NM is at critical point. Simply is not enough to meet the demand and especially with Covid-19. Are there ways for the State to provide support?

**Bobby**: Yes, most through the mortgage finance authority. They take the lead. What’s interesting, is it is quasi-government, but don’t have to abide like other agencies.

Part a – Is there someone we can contact on your staff?

**Bobby**: I don’t have staff and I have burnt out my family. But … constituents can always call my office. I will always make time. All 365 days of the year, I make it a point to call two constituents. I just go down the roster. Doesn’t matter what Party they’re from. I don’t mind taking calls. Contact info is in *Taos News.*

**Question 29:** Ham Brown -- The Health Security for All plan will include component to have a plan for global budgeting rural hospitals. What is your approach to stabilize the precarious situation of rural hospital in NM?

**Bobby**: I will do anything to support rural hospitals.

**Question 30:** Florence Mieira -- As a social worker, I am most concerned about families. Currently have 87 students. On my caseload are many children who are homeless or doubled up. We have many grandparents raising children and so forth …. Children are following their parents into intergenerational poverty and “learned helplessness” – how to break cycles of poverty and ill health?

**Bobby**: Very good question and we definitely need to address this, whether through more funding through different programs that provide assistance. We need to provide much more to this kind of situation. I know through the Earlly Childhood program, a lot of funding going into home visiting part, but whatever can be done, must be done. Hard to believe some of the cases we hear. Will be no limit on my part.

**Question 31:** Diane Dowd (?) -- There is use of Round-up on crops and along highways. Dozens of lawsuits from those who have been affected. Would you be willing to go against the pesticide lobby to challenge the law that allows pesticide use?

**Bobby:**  More than likely I would, but I would like to know more about it. Diane can give me a call for further discussion.

**Question 32:** Ham Brown. Regarding mortgages services in town. When I got my mortgage, I saw that the money was going to Wall Street. A New Mexico state bank can keep money inside NM. Do you support that?

**Bobby:** I agree. Any time we can keep dollars in our state, it is good.

**Question 33:** Tracy Brewer -- Do you support a financial literacy requirement for our high school students?  
**Bobby:** We should already have something like that in place. Is it readiness for college, or post high school? Please call me. But I’m pretty sure we have it and also at UNM Taos.

**Question 34:** Mike Musialowski, math teacher at Taos Academy. He had two students who wrote to Sen. Gonzales proposing adding a tax bracket to our system of 5.53% percent starting at $50,000. But learned it was set at 5.9% starting at 210,00. So that leaves incomes between 1$6,000 and $210,000 still essentially at lowest rate. Can it become more progressive?

**Bobby**: Yes.

**Question 35:** B. Manzanares – How to keep the state from raiding our land trust funds to provide for emergency programs?

**Bobby**: You have to have to safeguards. The one we have left mostly open for now is K-12 public school programs. Is at the mercy of the administration. … There is more to this. Say we have the formula for Taos Schools and once the funding goes to Taos Schools (meeting certain requirements), it is the School Board with full control. We (legislature) can’t intervene.

(Jay: Good reminder to elect good people at all levels! From School Boards on up!

**Question 36:** Bob Silver – What steps can and should NM take to protect New Mexicans from the torrent of disinformation? For example, the Republican Party is currently giving giving systematic disinformation?

**Bobby**: I couldn’t agree more. As long as individual sand Parties can get away with it, it is a flaw to democracy. Not abiding by the Constitution … All I can say is, Number One step is for people to be involved and vote. Need to have more meetings like this one, to be informed. To learn more. This is a good wake-up call to our country. I intend to do more on this – a big flaw is that we don’t teach civics or history any more, need to bring that back. That’s the main root of our foundation, to value the freedom of our democracy. The position doesn’t belong to us, elected officials – we are voted in to represent you. We need to more of that, keep working at it. In my time in House of Rep, one election was determined by one vote – each vote is important! Critical and concrete thinking skills, yes! We also need to get back to you more with information about what is going on in Round House.

**Question 37:** Dan -- I believe cannabis cultivation uses highly sophisticated drip irrigation, not flood irrigation. … and … Lisa Sharp: Cannabis water usage is less than alfalfa but more than corn.

**Bobby**: Okay.

**Question 38:** Justin Friedman: Why is the Governor against public bank. Will you get back to us?

**Bobby**: Yes, most definitely, will do. Just learned it today – Legislative Finance Committee is the hub for entire budget. Will relay it back to you.

**Question 39:** Peggy Mathias -- I am concerned with our environment. And some development, like shopping malls, is necessary. But monoculture and parking lots will not sustain NM. For example, prairie dogs are important to sustaining wildlife eco-system, must preserve some habitat. Can we balance development while preserving our plants and habitat and pollinators?

**Bobby**: Yes, we should, definitely.

**Question 40:** Pascualito Maestas, Town Councillor and School Board member – As a follow up on civics education. The PED sets curriculum with their end-of-course exams and teacher evaluation, heavily weighted with federal, but little on State and even less on local. How to add more of relevance and give

more local control to School Board and Town Council?

**Bobby**: Yes, that is exactly my point. We need to get back to understanding local government and history, and the state. It seems like we will have more education support with our newly elected President. My wife is a former teacher, too, so you will see lots of support for education.

**Proposal for Pascualito and others to come to him after this session and start working on a bill!**

**Question 41:** Tracy – Since Sen Gonzales is against the cannabis legislation – can it get onto the ballot to let the people voice their opinion?

**Bobby:** From my part, just seeing the results, it seems like the numbers are there. So you will see it. All I say is that in my time, we have supported some very good legislation but others that have not been good for the state. Once it is in place, it’s hard to take back. Very hard to repeal. So we’d better be ready for what it and not sitting here 10 years from now, regretting it. We just talked about poverty and low income, and I’d rather have this in dividual spending their $20-25 on bread and milk than on marijuana.

(Jay’s point – No way for people to bring issues to the ballot.)

**Bobby:** Another one that is important to me … we do little to address litter on our highways. Over $3 m is spent just paying people to pick up trash. I would rather have that go to education. We have lower fines and they are not enforced. Something like two time that citations have been issued. Anywhere you go, it helps everything: our environment, respect for the land, perception we give to visitors to our state.

Contact info and links so that you can:

* Reach Sen.Gonzales with questions and to express your opinions about specific legislation;
* Read about our priority bills, including one-page summaries;
* Register your own legislative priorities;
* Sign up to be an advocate for bills to improve our governance;
* Visit retakeourdemocracy.org/retake-supported-bills-for-2021-legislative-session/

Please join us for a Town Hall with Representatives Susan Hererra and Kristina Ortez,

on Wednesday, Jan 13 at 6:00 - 7:30 pm.