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Animated skunk escapes state budget ax

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ALBUQUERQUE (KRQE) - As schools and public agencies across New Mexico brace for painful budget cuts, cartoon character Pepe Le Pew is riding high on the state's Rose Parade float.

While cabinet secretaries this week have gone public this week with tentative plans for service losses and employee furloughs, there were no long faces Thursday when the New Mexico Department of Tourism called a news conference.

Tourism is facing the same 7.5 percent cuts as other state agencies, but it was unveiling the float it will sponsor at the annual Tournament of Roses parade in Pasadena, Calif., on New Years Day.

It will cost New Mexico taxpayers \$200,000, and despite our state's budget crisis, the state's Tourism Department believes the float that features hot air balloons with the New Mexico Zia, and the Warner Bros. animated skunk Pepe Le Pew is worth every penny.

The theme of the float is Enchantment is in the Air.

"Forty million people in the United States are seeing this float, and we don't know how many people around the world," Advertising Director Richard Eeds said. "You add all that up, and the cost of doing that float is very cost-effective for the state of New Mexico."

Still, state Rep. Larry Larrañaga, R-Albuquerque, questions whether a float will really bring tourists to New Mexico even if 40 million people will see it.

"Tell that to 30,000 people who have lost their jobs over the last year and a half," Larrañaga said. "They'll tell you this

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should not be a priority.

"Maybe they'll give us a key to Hollywood, but I don't think that makes any difference in New Mexico."

Eeds said the float is a better bargain than magazine ads and that he and other tourism officials who travel to the Tournament of Roses will spend less time in California this year.

"If we don't advertise, our neighbors will take those tourists," he said adding the money spent on the float would buy two full-page color picture ads in a national magazine.

And while the Department of Tourism may have to cut \$1.2 million from its \$17 million budget, Eeds said cutting the float is not under consideration. The state cannot afford to lose the exposure gained from its "Road Runner and Wile E. Coyote" float last year or the "Aliens" float from 2006, he said.

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