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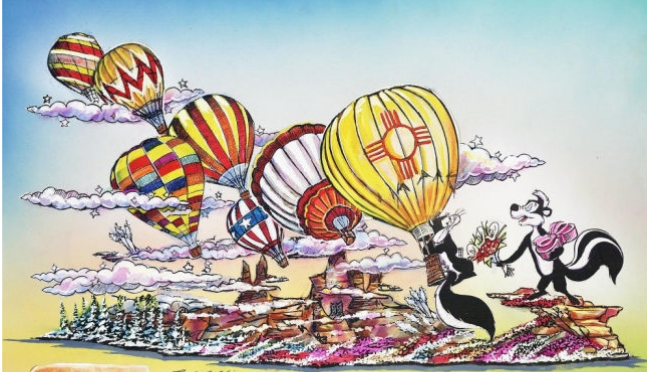


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Backers of New Mexico's parade entry say the float could spark more interest in tourism; however, some legislators say the cost of the float — \$166,000 — is an extravagance the state can't afford.



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Lawmakers say float costs add to budget woes

Amid spending cuts, some argue Rose Parade entry not 'essential'

Kate Nash | The New Mexican
Posted: Thursday, October 29, 2009 - 10/29/09

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The float that New Mexico will enter in the 2010 Tournament of Roses Parade will feature seven hot-air balloons and cartoon skunk Pepé Le Pew, along with the object of his romantic pursuit, Penelope Pussycat.

Backers of the state's latest flower-covered entry in the widely broadcast New Year's Day spectacle in Pasadena, Calif., say it should spark more interest in tourism here.

But does the state really need to shell out \$166,000 for such an extravaganza?

Some lawmakers, who have spent a lot of time lately trying to slash state spending, don't think so.

"It's nice to have something like that, but is it an essential service?" said Rep. Larry Larrañaga, R-Albuquerque. "It isn't, not when you are looking at the essential services we should be providing."

Other legislators in Larrañaga's caucus agreed, placing the float on a hit list during the Legislature's recent special session that included 47 agencies, contracts or services that should be cut.

Many of those money-saving ideas — which ranged from reducing executive staff at the governor's mansion to terminating employees on administrative leave for more than 90 days — didn't get very far.

State officials unveiled the new float's design Thursday in Albuquerque.

Department of Tourism officials defend the expense, saying past participation in the event has meant wide

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exposure for the state.

"The response the state has received from the Tourism Department's appearance in the 2006, 2008 and 2009 Tournament of Roses Parades and the media efforts we sponsored primarily targeting the southern California travel market have been tremendous," Tourism Department Secretary Mike Cerletti declared in a statement.

A department news release listed mass-media coverage of past parades, but no numbers on how many tourists who saw the parade and subsequently visited New Mexico were provided.

While one part of state government is focused on reaching out to potential visitors, and the revenue they could bring, others are more worried about preserving jobs and critical services in the near future — something Gov. Bill Richardson's administration has suggested this week isn't possible under the \$253 million in budget cuts approved by the Legislature last week.

Under the plan for bridging a gap between projected revenues and spending for the current fiscal year, departments under the governor's control would see a 7.6 percent cut to save \$94 million.

On Tuesday, the administration said the plan would mean reductions in children's health care, nutrition programs for seniors and programs for the developmentally disabled, if the governor were to sign the measures.

On Wednesday, it said that going with lawmakers' decisions would mean closing two state prisons, releasing up to 660 prisoners and laying off or furloughing state workers.

And, on Thursday, statements issued by both the Long-Term Services Department and the Children, Youth and Families Department raised more concerns about the impact of budget cuts, saying they would mean "many more seniors will go hungry" and would "threaten the safety of children and families in every corner of the state," among other things.

Both departments could see employee furloughs under the plan, the administration said.

Aging Department Acting Secretary Michael Spanier said the number of meals delivered to seniors could be reduced by more than 250,000. "This will add to the already staggering and dire need to address hunger in New Mexico," he said in a statement. "Many more seniors will go hungry."

A 7.6 percent cut in that department equals a \$3.7 million budget reduction.

At Children, Youth and Families, Secretary Dorian Dodson said the cuts "will threaten CYFD's ability to investigate abuse and neglect of children, and identify a safe home for children who are at the greatest risk of being harmed."

The cut at the department equals \$15.2 million, Dodson said.

Lawmakers this week have said the choices about where to cut the budget are up to the governor, and they won't accept the blame.

Many instead pointed a finger at Richardson for wasteful spending in the face of an economic crisis, while others say the governor has the flexibility to use federal stimulus money to help patch up budget holes.

Still others note that the governor specifically prohibited them from raising revenue or making large cuts to education during the session, something they say would have made the situation easier for state agencies.

"The governor does have that money squirreled away somewhere and that could be made available to offset some of these proposed cuts," said Rep. Luciano "Lucky" Varela, a Santa Fe Democrat and chairman of the Legislature's budget oversight committee. He said the bill doesn't require a 7.6 percent cut for each executive agency, allowing the governor to tailor cuts to each program and agency.

Some administration programs, such as law enforcement in the Public Safety Department and public defenders, were subject to 2 percent cuts. Lawmakers also say Medicaid and services for the developmentally disabled were excluded from the 7.6 percent cuts.

However, Richardson contends that Medicaid is subject to reductions because of language used in budget bills.

The governor initially received \$58 million in federal economic stimulus aid that could be spent at his discretion without the approval of lawmakers. During last week's special session, the Legislature earmarked \$20 million of that to help plug a \$650 million state revenue shortfall.

Gilbert Gallegos, a spokesman for Richardson, said the Legislature was attempting to improperly appropriate the \$20 million.

He also said the governor had already pledged much of the federal stimulus money, including \$22 million for local government projects, \$10 million for solar electric systems in public schools, \$4 million for the College of Santa Fe and nearly \$9 million for other educational programs.

However, finance committee vice chairman Sen. John Arthur Smith, a Deming Democrat, said Richardson could redirect part of the federal money and tell local governments and others it's needed for state operations, such as prisons.

The steady barrage of bad news put out by the administration in the wake of the special session has led some to speculate that Richardson could veto the entire budget package, which could leave the state in financial limbo and add to the financial pressure when the Legislature convenes for its regular session in January.

The governor has until Nov. 12 to act on the budget-cutting legislation.

The Associated Press contributed to this report.

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PARADE PROMO COSTS

Tournament of Roses Parade float contract (construction and design): **\$186,000**

Costs offset by sponsors: **\$25,000**

Sponsorship by the State Parks Division: **\$5,000**

Total state cost of contract: **\$166,000**, which doesn't include other costs "associated with the overall Southern California/parade promotion." Those are still being determined.

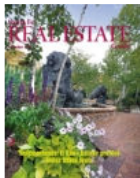
Source: Tourism Department

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