

## MY VIEW

### Investments in roads move state forward

By Rep. Patricio Ruiloba

The alarming ring of increasing economic development opportunities, improving education for our kids and diversifying our economy, has been constant during my time in the Legislature. These are very important issues. Still, I find myself asking, “How can the success of any of these initiatives come to fruition if our roadways are in poor condition?”

As chairman of the House Transportation Committee, testimony by community members, leaders, and county and city directors continually describes poor road conditions and the need for better roads for increased tourism, growing industry and the transportation of products in their communities. Simply put, I am looking to eliminate the popping corn effect our children’s heads resemble when traveling to and from school in a bus.

Traveling across this beautiful and scenic land is frequently interrupted with potholes, rough roads, eroding shoulders and, in some areas, resemblance to the original Camino Real. Our roadways are our lifeblood, and their condition is imperative to our state’s economic and cultural vitality. But the numbers detailing their condition point to a story of neglect and much-needed investment to ensure we continue driving forward.

According to TRIP, a national transportation research group, 30 percent of rural New Mexico roads are in poor condition, affecting farmers’ and ranchers’ ability to get their products to market. The poor condition of our roads costs drivers an average of \$770 annually in vehicle maintenance costs, or a total of \$1.1 billion statewide. Fifty-four percent of New Mexico roadways and highways are in poor or mediocre condition. When you add up all the necessary costs associated with bringing us up to speed, we’re in the hole \$2.76 billion, with increases expected every year unless change is identified.

The change began last year, with the support of the state Department of Transportation. I sponsored House Bill 694, creating the Local Government Transportation Project Fund. The fund provides a

mechanism for local governments to apply for and access state, federal and municipal dollars for the construction and maintenance of our highways, streets, roadways, bridges, crossing structures and parking facilities, as well as for all other costs associated with them.

These \$50 million nonrecurring disbursements were truly a game changer because, for the first time, small communities have simplified access to the funding they need to improve their roadways and local economies. The collaborative vision with Transportation Secretary Michael Sandoval, which produced HB 694, signals a new beginning for New Mexico’s local road needs. The fund provides for safe road conditions, creating construction jobs and boosting economic development.

HB 694 provided a narrative for this session by highlighting the success that resulted in the completion of over 50 local road projects this fiscal year.

Partnerships continued and were extended to collaboration with contractors to produce House Bills 220 and 307. If passed and signed, these bills would increase investments from the motor vehicle excise tax for state and local road funds while restricting the money from being wasted on bond repayments. This would be money invested directly into our communities, and starting in 2022, would generate \$30 million for the local road fund and \$9 million for the local government transportation project fund.

Fiscal projections indicate that the recurring amount of money to these funds over time would continue to increase. This is what we need to ensure safe roads and diversify our economy. HB 307 could potentially reduce costs to the department by identifying a collaborative process that encouraged the contractor and the project owner to look at all options, including using innovative techniques or approaches to reduce construction time or costs.

*Rep. Patricio Ruiloba, D-Albuquerque, represents the South Valley of Albuquerque and serves as chairman of the House Transportation Committee.*