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GOP Leader Townsend: The public cannot be excluded from the People's House

Late last week, the New Mexico Legislative Council, a bipartisan panel made up of House and Senate leadership, was presented a potential plan to hold the upcoming 2021 Legislative session in a hybrid format that would have the legislature contract with the Santa Fe Community Convention Center (SFCCC) to provide space for limited public participation during the 60 day session. The proposal is expected to be voted on next Monday following last week's lengthy discussion on the merits and pitfalls of entering into the contract and how best to protect the health and wellbeing of the public, legislative staff and members of the House and Senate.

"We have been presented with several different scenarios on conducting the Legislative Session in January," said House Republican Leader Jim Townsend (Artesia). "The fact remains that the Governor is encouraging people across our state to stay indoors, limiting gatherings to no more than 5 people, restricting businesses activities, and mandating everyone wear a mask. Democrat leaders and the Governor have insisted we close churches, schools and every other facet of our lives during this pandemic. For legislators to then convene in January is disrespectful to the public who will certainly be excluded from attending committee hearings or lobbying their elected officials in-person."

Additionally, questions remain about the plan to test legislators and staff, and how the legislative chambers will mitigate and prevent possible virus spread while also allowing members of the public to attend and interact with legislators.

"In reality, there is no reason to rush the Legislative Session this year when there is a high likelihood that we would have to return in a Special Session or Extraordinary Session, later in the spring or summer, to readjust our budget when our state's fiscal situation is clearer," Townsend continued. "If New Mexicans are being told to skip Thanksgiving and Christmas with family members because of the risk, then we can surely delay the session until later this spring when it is warmer, when the virus is hopefully more manageable, and most importantly when we can fully include the public in the process."

The New Mexico Legislature operates annually as "The People's House," and is one of the most accessible legislative bodies in the nation. It is the House Republicans' position that transparency concerns should be fully vetted before any decisions are made about how both chambers will operate. The Legislature did meet in a Special Session in the summer of 2020, however, the public was not allowed to participate in-person and at times internet connectivity delayed or stopped debate on important bills. According to a recent [Albuquerque Journal](#) editorial, New Mexico ranks 49th in the nation in terms of access to wired broadband service with rural New Mexico lagging substantially behind the metro areas.

Leader Townsend finished by stressing that any plan that limits the public's participation in the process must not move forward. "There is already too much skepticism of the legislative process. Proceeding

under the current circumstances would likely be done with little or no public input and exacerbate the distrust in this institution,” said Townsend. “Our work must be done with full transparency, anything less would be an insult to the people we represent. Delaying the session is the only way to maintain the safety of the community while ensuring full public participation in the process. House Republicans stand ready to work with legislative leaders and the Governor to ensure the upcoming session is fair and transparent, and most importantly inclusive of everyone in New Mexico.”

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