A look ahead to 2014: More cooperation among local governments, economic challenges

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Clouds build over the Organ Mountains during monsoon season this year. There are competing bills to create a national monument that would protect the iconic mountains as well as other peaks in Doña Ana County. (Robin Zielinski — Sun-News FILE PHOTO)

LAS CRUCES >> A better working relationship with Doña Ana County government and local school boards is the New Year's resolution city officials should pursue, Mayor Ken Miyagishima said.

Shrinking funding sources -- which will make for leaner budgets -- are a good reason for more collaboration with local government entities in 2014, Miyagishima said. "I think we've all reached the point where we need to start thinking outside of the box ... and start working much more closely together to share our resources."

One longtime goal of Miyagishima's has been the construction of a large kitchen facility to prepare meals for senior centers in Las Cruces. He identified a site off South Campo Street, where a city-owned parking lot has been mostly vacant for several years.

Miyagishima believes such a facility could also serve a wider purpose -- preparing food for the county's senior centers and its Meals on Wheels program.

"It could be something the community at-large could benefit from," Miyagishima said. "The county nearly lost its Meals on Wheels program this year, and that would have been a real shame. ..."

"Because of what's happened with the economy, we're going to see more and more of the small communities looking at the city for leadership. We need to be prepared for that, and I believe we're capable of providing that leadership."

The new year will, again, present interesting challenges and opportunities for local governments and school boards throughout Doña Ana County. Here's a sampling of what could happen.

City government

It might not have all the buzz that construction of City Hall did several years ago, but anticipation is growing among city officials for groundbreaking on a public safety complex that will house East Mesa substations for city police and fire departments.
The campus will be built on 300 acres the city wants to acquire from the Bureau of Land Management. Obviously, the city won't need that much land, but the majority would be earmarked for other public uses, such as a park where trails, picnic areas, soccer fields and possibly even a shooting range have been envisioned. Development of the multipurpose park would happen over a period of several years.

The coming year could also be a breakout year for downtown revitalization. In the coming weeks, the Las Cruces City Council will be presented with the results of a downtown design charrette, which incorporates ideas from residents presented earlier this fall.

The downtown Tax Increment Development District -- which keeps taxes collected downtown in the district -- will likely be ready to begin projects aimed at improving infrastructure in the area.

"The city's now in a position where we have to start using that downtown TIDD money before it sunsets on us," Miyagishima said. "I'm certain we're going to see some significant movement on that this coming year."

What could that money be used for? Miyagishima quickly pointed to a much-anticipated downtown plaza. City officials have hesitated to publicly discuss details because purchase of a property for a civic plaza has not been finalized. But Miyagishima hinted this could be the year the property acquisition happens.

"We're the only city in New Mexico that doesn't have a real downtown plaza, a public gathering place," said Las Crucen Beth Suarez, an administrative assistant. "There's pretty good public consensus that a plaza should be the number one priority for downtown. Like everybody else, I'd like to see that happen sooner than later."

Downtown's first new housing development in decades should open during the coming year. Construction began this fall for The Lofts, an estimated $3 million complex of condominiums and lofts that will be built at the corner of Alameda Boulevard and Court Avenue. City officials and downtown business owners have long said downtown housing is badly needed if vitality is to return.

The city will also implement an additional three-eighths of 1 percent sales tax increase on July 1. City officials have said the tax increase should help mitigate the state's repeal of Hold Harmless funds, which have provided stipends to Las Cruces and other municipal and county governments across the state in exchange for waiving the collections of sales taxes on food, medicine and some medical services.

"That's a lot of lost revenue to the city, and it's something we have to start being concerned about," Miyagishima said. "More and more, people are shopping online."

National monument

A bill introduced in December by U.S. Sens. Tom Udall and Martin Heinrich, New Mexico Democrats, to create a national monument and federal wilderness out of 780 square miles of public lands in Doña Ana County. Known as the Organ Mountains-Desert Peaks National Monument, it could see movement this year. There is also a competing bill sponsored by U.S. Rep. Steve Pearce that is far more limited in scope, protecting just the area around the Organ Mountains. Federal wilderness is the highest level of protection public lands can have and some opponents are worried it will put a lot of the area off-limits to ranchers and outdoor enthusiasts. Sportsmen and environmental groups are supporting Udall and Heinrich’s measure as needed protection and for the potential to increase tourism. If the national monument bill fails to clear the U.S. Congress by the end of 2014, it would have to be reintroduced.
Education

This will be the first year a new state standardized assessment, called the Partnership for Assessment of Readiness for College and Careers (PARCC), will be utilized. The new test is aligned with the new Common Core State Standards curriculum.

A new Doña Ana Community College president will be chosen sometime this year. Margie Huerta, the former DACC president, is scheduled to retire Jan. 31. Andy Burke has been serving as interim president since June.

Registered voters in the Las Cruces Public Schools and Gadsden Independent School District will go to the polls Feb. 4 for bond elections. Neither of those bond elections is expected to increase property taxes in the districts.

The Las Cruces Public Schools will be seeking $65 million in general obligation bonds, as well as the renewal of a three-mil capital improvements tax levy that would fund continued renovations at Las Cruces High School, safety improvements at many other schools and additional maintenance.

Significant renovations at Las Cruces High School are anticipated to begin in early January, and could continue for several years. An "urban campus" is planned, including a bridge across El Paseo Road that would link Las Cruces High's western campus with new eastern campus classrooms that will be built.

The Gadsden school district needs $38 million in general obligation bonds, which would be used for continued renovation at Gadsden High School, building a new elementary school in Chaparral, and a new school in the southern area of the Gadsden district.

Also this year, New Mexico State University's Board of Regents could begin discussions about changes to the university's admission requirements.

The first classes at Centennial and Arrowhead Park Early College High Schools will graduate in May. That will increase the number of graduation ceremonies staged in the Las Cruces Public Schools, from the previous four events to six.

Also, the Las Cruces Public Schools is expected to roll out a new General Educational Development exam and program. School district officials have said it will be more expensive, harder and computerized.

White Sands Missile Range

On the horizon at White Sands Missile Range, the biggest issue is federal budget tightening.

In 2013, WSMR's civilian employees were forced to endure once-a-week job furloughs then a break in their pay during a government shutdown in October. On Thursday, President Obama signed a bipartisan budget deal that restores about one-third of the sequester, approximately $63 billion over two years, to the Department of Defense. A separate defense bill provided $552.1 billion for the regular military budget and $80.7 billion for the war in Afghanistan and other overseas operations, according to an Associated Press report. The difference in the budget deal and Pentagon appropriations will need to be reconciled in the new year.
"Our most precious resource -- our people -- continue to be my number-one priority in 2014," said Maj. Gen. Gwen Bingham, WSMR commander. "We wouldn't be the 'national treasure' I fondly talk about without each of these stalwart professionals who are committed to supporting our multi-missions."

Even without sequestration, WSMR stands to lose in 2014. One company of the 2nd Engineer Battalion will be relocated during the year, as part of a restructuring of Army forces.

"We understand and fully support the rationale behind this decision," Bingham said. "We will continually keep our neighboring community leaders aware of the timetable associated with the unit's departure."

Like the city, WSMR leaders will also be pushing for better collaboration with officials outside of WSMR's gates on issues of mutual concern.

"We are excited to begin a new forum in partnership with our university presidents that is an extension of our Academic Memorandum of Agreement made in August of 2012," Bingham said. "Our academic summit, slated for Feb. 26, is intended to bring together university and Team WSMR leaders and decisionmakers for the expressed purpose of information exchange."

Law and order

As the new year begins, there are a lot of new faces in law enforcement leadership. The Las Cruces Police Department promoted Jaime Montoya to police chief on Dec. 20. Doña Ana County Sheriff Todd Garrison is entering his final year -- because of terms limits -- and an election for a new sheriff will be conducted in November.

The New Mexico State Police, in Las Cruces, will have a new captain, too. That comes on the heels of the past year when the Hatch Police Department went through two chiefs, and Mesilla got a new marshal, Tom Austin.

Las Crucens should also get a better understanding of how District Attorney Mark D'Antonio's policies are affecting things. He's spent much of the first year scrambling to catch up due to a mass exodus of attorneys after the heated 2012 campaign. There has been a lot of shifting in his office in the first year.

There will be two new Magistrate Court judges, including a replacement for the influential Oscar Fretze, who retired in late 2013.

In federal court cases, the Reese family of Deming could get a new trial. Three family members were convicted in a Las Cruces court for making false statements to federal officials during a firearms sting. But they were granted a new trial by a federal judge because of evidence suppressed by the government.

In state court, Robert Flores, the man convicted of leaving his infant daughter to suffocate in a laundry basket while he went on a beer run, has an appeal coming. Based on the rulings of the trial judge after the conviction, Flores appears to have a chance of getting a new trial.

Daniel Salinas, the central figure in the Sunland Park corruption cases, is also set to go to trial in 2014. Salinas is Sunland Park's former mayor pro tem.

Doña Ana County

County commissioners are facing a year of hard decisions as they attempt to figure out how to cut a $15.4 million budget gap in the current budget cycle. Ideas have included a sales tax increase, a hiring freeze and reworking right-of-way fees for utility companies, among others. Cuts to non-county agencies also could be on the way.
commission must OK its final 2014-15 budget in July, but major decisions are likely to be made in the months leading up to that.

The year will be the first on the job for newly hired County Manager Julia Brown of Las Cruces, an attorney with a background in economic development. She's the main employee of the County Commission. Commissioners and employees have expressed hopes for her tenure.

A number of county elected positions will appear on a primary election ballot and the November midterm election, including the County Commission District 1 seat, held by Democrat Billy Garrett, and County Commission District 3 seat, held by Republican Ben Rawson; the county assessor, held by Democrat Andy Segovia; the county sheriff, held by Republican Todd Garrison; and the county probate judge, held by Democrat Alice Salcido.

Spaceport America

New Mexico Spaceport Authority officials have said they're not expecting Virgin Galactic launches to happen any earlier than August.

Officials with Virgin Galactic, the spaceport's main tenant, have declined to specify a date, saying the start of flights depends upon the development of safe spaceflight vehicles. Development and testing of its spaceship and a rocket to power that vehicle are still ongoing in Mojave, Calif.

The Spaceport Authority plans to seek an additional $6.9 million from the Legislature this year to pay for a southern road to the spaceport. The delayed start of flights and the lack of a spaceport visitors center -- both expected sources of revenue -- prompted the spaceport to cut into its previously set-aside money for the southern road.

Spaceport America is a $212 million, state taxpayer-owned facility located just north of Doña Ana County.

Surrounding communities

Sunland Park, a city plagued by scandal during its 2010 municipal election, will host another city election in March.

But this time, it will happen under the tenure of a different mayor, Javier Perea, and a recently hired city manager who starts in January. In Hatch, frustration with village officials over the firing of the police chief and other issues could play into that village's municipal election in March.

The town of Mesilla and the city of Anthony, N.M., also will conduct elections. In Mesilla, voters will elect -- or re-elect -- a mayor and two trustees. Mayor Nora Barraza has announced her intentions to seek a second four-year term. Trustee Jesus Caro Jr. also will run for mayor.

Seats on the Mesilla board of trustees, currently held by Caro and Linda Flores will also be up for election, on March 4.

The Union Pacific railyard looks like it will be opening ahead of schedule this year near Santa Teresa, which is expected to spur growth of other industries in the border community, as well as housing.

Water

After the worst drought in the nearly 100-year history of Doña Ana County river-water irrigating, farmers are hoping for a strong snow season in the southern Colorado and northern New Mexico mountains that serve as the
water source for the Rio Grande. The first three months of the year tend to be the most crucial for building up the snowpack, water officials have said.

A poor snowpack will result in a low water allocation for farmers.

Farmers and other water users in the Lower Rio Grande Basin are also waiting to hear word about possible Supreme Court action on a lawsuit between Texas and New Mexico over water sharing and use below Elephant Butte Lake.

Road projects

The orange barrels around Las Cruces won't be going away in 2014.

The New Mexico Department of Transportation will have several projects in the coming year that city motorists will have to pay attention to.

Work to replace the Interstate 25 overpass at Missouri Avenue is expected to begin this year. Also, work at the I-10 and Vado interchange will include the construction of roundabouts at each end of the interchange.

Additional safety improvements are planned on U.S. Highway 70, from I-25 east to Rinconada Boulevard. A concrete barrier from I-25 to Rinconada will be installed.

Work is also expected to continue for the first half of the year to replace the I-10 overpass at Avenida de Mesilla. Construction of the bridge for eastbound I-10 traffic will resume in earnest right after New Year's Day. Once that has been completed, I-10 traffic will be switched onto the new overpass and work to demolish the old westbound bridge will start.

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