University chiefs urge state to restore funding

Governor vetoed higher education money pending special session

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The presidents of New Mexico's public universities are imploring Gov. Susana Martinez and lawmakers to restore their institutions' funding, arguing that the financial insecurity could cost them students and faculty, and might also jeopardize their accreditation and hinder statewide economic development.

A letter sent to Martinez and members of the Legislature and signed by the leaders at New Mexico's seven public four-year universities expresses "deep concern" over the governor's veto of all higher education funding for the fiscal year that starts July 1. It seeks reinstatement of no less than the $744.8 million approved by the Legislature — a sum eliminated by the governor in what has become a messy budget battle.

"The message the veto sent to our 133,505 registered students and their families, while unintended, leaves them confused and wondering whether they should enroll in a New Mexico college, whether they'll be able to finish their degree, or whether they'll be able to graduate. While we are trying to calm their fears, there is concern that many of our state's brightest students will move to other states to pursue their higher education," they wrote.

The Republican governor said earlier this week that universities would be funded by July 1, and her spokesman, Michael Lonergan, reiterated that Friday.

"We fully expect this situation to be resolved," he said in a written statement, noting that the governor has begun meeting with legislative leaders as they work toward a new budget deal that would prompt a special session and restored higher education funding.

The Governor's Office calls the defunding a temporary measure and part of an effort to get a balanced budget without the tax increases also passed by the Democratic-controlled Legislature. Democratic lawmakers, meanwhile, have blasted the decision and taken steps toward suing the governor.

The university presidents stress in their letter that the state provides 50 percent to 60 percent of their instruction and general budgets. They say their institutions "simply cannot exist without" that money.

They add that some faculty members are considering jobs in places with "more certainty in higher education," and that the budget questions could jeopardize their accreditation by the Higher Learning Commission, which considers certain financial measures.

The letter was written on Council of University Presidents letterhead and signed by Garrey Carruthers, New Mexico State University chancellor; Chaouki Abdallah, University of New Mexico acting president; Stephen Wells, New Mexico Institute of Mining and Technology president; Joseph Shepard, Western New Mexico University president; Steven Gamble, Eastern New Mexico University president; Sam Minner Jr., New Mexico Highlands president; and Richard Bailey Jr., Northern New Mexico College president.

The council is an association of New Mexico's four-year universities. The governor's veto also eliminated funding for the state's two-year colleges.

In a Journal interview, Carruthers expressed confidence that schools will have funding by July 1 but said that not knowing the amount has complicated each institution's own budget
process. The state requires them to submit a budget to the Higher Education Department by May 1.

Carruthers said the department has suggested working with the appropriations approved by the Legislature, but there is no guarantee that amount will materialize. And that appropriation is still 1 percent smaller than this year’s funding level, which itself is about 7½ percent less than last fiscal year.

UNM’s Abdallah was traveling Friday and could not be reached for comment. But Craig White, acting provost and co-chairman of UNM’s “budget leadership team” said it has already worked toward a financial plan that assumes a funding shortfall. But final recommendations are on hold.

Carruthers said Martinez’s unexpected action has prompted students to ask him if the school would be open this fall. Carruthers, a Republican former governor, also questioned how people outside the state—particularly businesses that might consider locating in New Mexico—might perceive the move.

“What’s the signal we’re supposed to get?” he said. “I think when you do things like this you have to understand that this picture is the picture that’s used (for) the state of New Mexico. When someone’s looking to locate a company here and they see this kind of occurrence, one would have to wonder about the political environment and whether this is a place their company might be comfortable.”