

A rumble in the Roundhouse: NM lawmakers ready for start of busy 60-day legislative session

By Dan Boyd and Megan Gleason / Journal Staff Writers

Jan 20, 2025 Updated Jan 21, 2025

SANTA FE — New Mexico lawmakers will embark on a 60-day legislative session Tuesday featuring a packed agenda, a mountain of new revenue and lots of new faces.

The session will begin at noon at the Roundhouse and lawmakers were already busy Monday hearing final pre-session budget reports and undergoing anti-harassment training.

Gov. Michelle Lujan Grisham will deliver her State of the State address after lawmakers take care of opening-day housekeeping duties, including announcing committee assignments and voting on top House and Senate leadership positions.

The Democratic governor, who is entering her final 60-day legislative session, is expected to largely focus on public safety and crime-related issues during her speech.

But Lujan Grisham also said last week she plans to announce twice-yearly independent reviews of New Mexico's beleaguered Children, Youth & Families Department.

Some lawmakers have already indicated they will push legislation creating a new watchdog agency, but the governor indicated she opposes such a plan.

"I think it causes contention," she said, referring to outside oversight. "Instead of solving the issues, you fight with the (other) entity."

As of Monday, more than 200 bills had already been filed — 125 in the House and 78 in the Senate — and hundreds more proposals are expected to be filed before the Feb. 20 deadline to introduce legislation.

New faces in the Roundhouse

In addition to returning lawmakers, a total of 29 new legislators will take the oath of office Tuesday after winning election last year.

In all, the new lawmakers will make up roughly 26% of the Legislature, and could inject new ideas into debates on public safety, education, environment and mental health treatment.

Mark Murphy, a Roswell oilman, is the newest addition to the ranks of first-term lawmakers, after being appointed last week by Chaves County commissioners to fill a vacancy caused by former Rep. Jared Hembree's decision to step down due to health issues.

Murphy told the Journal he's not completely unfamiliar with the legislative process, as he's been involved with the Independent Petroleum Association of New Mexico for 40 years.

As one of the dozens of new faces, he's hopeful the freshmen legislators can help encourage bipartisan efforts.

"I'm going to remain cautiously optimistic until I'm proven wrong," he said. "... I think the country has spoken pretty loudly on what the priorities should be and that they want to see meaningful progress, and they expect that from both parties."

His No. 1 priority is addressing damage from the flooding that tore through Roswell and Chaves County in October, he said. He's also focused on the oil and gas industries and crime-related legislation.

As he reads up on past legislation and gets settled in his new Roundhouse office, Murphy hopes to also have time to visit with his new grandbaby while in Santa Fe.

"I'm very excited about the job ahead," he said.

An empty seat still remains in the House, following former [Rep. Eliseo Alcon's resignation in November](#). The [Milan Democrat died earlier this year at 74](#) years old after battling liver cancer.

Session could get off to a brisk start

While issues tend to get bottlenecked near the end of the longer 60-day sessions that take place in odd-numbered years, House Speaker Javier Martínez, D-Albuquerque, said he expects issues around criminal competency and behavioral health to move quickly during the first few weeks of this year's session.

Another priority for majority Democrats is affordability, said Martínez, who was a guest [on the second episode of the Journal's new Rounding Up the Roundhouse podcast](#).

"Especially in light of what potentially is coming the next four years, we want to make sure that we take care of working New Mexicans and ensure that their cost of living doesn't increase," Martínez said, referring to President Donald Trump being sworn in Monday as the 47th president of the U.S.

Cost-of-living issues in New Mexico are tied to energy, said House Republican Caucus Chair Rebecca Dow, R-Truth or Consequences. She said access to affordable, reliable energy is the primary cause of inflation.

“But New Mexico, with our resources across the state — not just oil and gas but all of our minerals — provide us with the opportunity to make sure every New Mexico citizen has affordable, reliable energy,” Dow said during the Journal podcast.

Meanwhile, all topics are up for debate in a 60-day session, which feature no bill limits or restrictions on subject matter.

“With 112 members of the Legislature, there are 112 really good ideas on any given day on any given issue,” Martínez said.

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