

NEW MEXICO SENATE DEMOCRATS

For immediate release

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Senate Passes Bipartisan Bill Reforming Troubled New Mexico Finance Authority

The Senate passed a bipartisan bill on Monday that would change the qualifications required of members of the New Mexico Finance Authority Board as well as allow the Legislature more input on its composition. In addition, Senate Bill 12, which is sponsored by Senator Tim Keller (D, Bernalillo, District 17) and Representative James P. White (R, Bernalillo, District 20), also calls for stricter auditing procedures to prevent a similar auditing fiasco that occurred with the board last year.

SB 12, which was substituted and amended by the Senate Finance Committee, also would allow the board to elect its own chairman and vice-chairman, rather than having the chair appointed by the governor. It would require members have no less than 10 years' experience in the field of institutional investment, accounting, law, public finance, banking or public project planning or engineering. A floor amendment by Senator Linda Lopez (D, Bernalillo, District 11) was approved by the Senate and stipulates that all of the board members be required to have the same qualifications.

"This bill increases the transparency of financial documents," said Senator Keller, who added that the four-year terms would be staggered. There would also be stricter attendance rules: three absences in 12 months and the member is removed.

SB 12, which passed on a 41-0 floor vote, also requires that any Authority member shall not hold office or employment in any political party. The state auditor would also be required to conduct an annual audit of the NMFA and make its findings public.

The bill also requires the board to appoint an audit committee out of its own members, who must take courses in auditing training, to oversee audit procedures to avoid an auditing fiasco from happening again. An investigation revealed that the NMFA approved an internal audit last year that was faked and copied from the year before and no one on the board noticed. The discovery resulted in national embarrassment, a loss of credit ratings, a major shakeup of the board and an outcry for changes.

The 11-member board would be comprised of four members appointed by the governor, one being a certified public accountant, with no more than two from the same political party and with the advice and consent of the Senate; the executive director of the New Mexico Municipal League; the executive director of the New Mexico Association of Counties; the secretary of Finance and Administration; two public members appointed by the president pro tempore of the Senate, one from each political party, with the advice and consent of the Senate; and two public members appointed by the Speaker of the House of Representatives, one from each political party, with the advice and consent of the Senate.

Bill Would Allow A-F Grading Exceptions for Schools With High Numbers of Troubled Students

A bill passed by the Senate Education Committee on Monday morning would amend the A-F School Rating Act of 2011 and add criteria for schools whose student populations face an increased dilemma of negative social obstacles compared with other schools. Senate Bill 370, "School Rating Modified Assessment Formula," now heads for review before the Senate Public Affairs Committee.

SB 379, sponsored by Michael S. Sanchez (D, Bernalillo, Valencia, District 29), changes the definition of a "supplemental accountability model school" (SAM) as a public school whose student population is comprised of at least 75 percent of any combination of the following: students with a history or family history of incarceration or extended or significant involvement in a court system; students with a history of gang involvement; students who are pregnant or have one or more children; students with a history of physical or mental health issues, including abuse, neglect, domestic violence, drug or alcohol use, disease or chronic or severe medical conditions; students with a history of school-discipline issues, including suspension or expulsion; students with a history of inconsistent school attendance, including multiple unexcused absences and habitual truancy; students who withdrew from school for one or more semesters; students with a history of below-grade-level academic performance; students with a history of not meeting academic expectations pursuant to the students individualized education plans; or students with a disability or other special needs."

The proposed amendment would allow SAM-qualified schools the following exception under the A-F grading system: the current standing of the school shall be weighted 10 points; the growth of the top 75 percent of students shall be weighted 20 points; the growth of the bottom 25 percent of students shall be weighted 20 points; the results of the opportunity to learn survey shall be weighted 20 points; the graduation rate shall be weighted 10 points; and the college and career readiness of students shall be weighted 20 points.

Senate Passes Bill to Form Council to Address Native Suicides

The Senate unanimously approved a bill that creates an 11-member Native American Suicide Prevention Advisory Council. Senate Bill 447, sponsored by Senator Benny Shendo Jr., (Bernalillo, McKinley, Rio Arriba, San Juan, Sandoval, District 22) and Representative Sandra D. Jeff, (S, McKinley, San Juan, District 5).

The council, which would represent all Native diversity in the state, to provide culturally appropriate suicide prevention, intervention and post-event assistance statewide to Native American individuals, families and tribes, nations and Pueblos living with suicide, attempted suicide, or the risk of suicide. Studies have shown that Native American youth have higher rates per capita of suicide or attempted suicide than other groups.

The bill calls for the training of Native American veterans as counselors and the administration of suicide prevention programs for youth and their families in Cibola, McKinley, and San Juan counties.

In other Senate Action:

* In a party line vote, the Senate Judiciary Committee approved Senate Joint Resolution 3, sponsored by Senator Michael S. Sanchez, (Bernalillo, Valencia, District 29), which would let the voters decide in a constitutional amendment question on the ballot whether to extend the current 5.5 percent funding level taken from the Land Grant Permanent Fund before the rate sunsets. The bill would also designate that 1 percent of the more than 11 billion dollar permanent fund go specifically toward early childhood education programs.

* The Senate Education Committee approved a bill Monday morning that would grant excused absences for junior high, middle or high school students missing school because of childbirth and students parenting children under 13 years old. Senate Bill 382, sponsored by Senator Linda Lopez and Representative Rick Miera (Bernalillo, District 11), would provide students up to 10 excused days for childbirth and up to four days excused absences to a parent tending to a child needing care. The leave would also grant the students the time to make up the schoolwork missed equal to the time they were absent. To be eligible, the students are required to provide proof to school officials of the childbirth or parenthood.

* The Senate Judiciary Committee on Monday approved Senate Bill 395, Public Works Whistleblower Confidentiality, sponsored by Senator Carlos Cisneros (Los Alamos, Rio Arriba, Santa Fe, Taos, District 6). The bill adds a requirement to the Public Works Minimum Wage Act that prohibits the director of Labor Relations Division of the Workforce Solutions Department (WSD) from disclosing the name or other identifying information of an employee who reports violations of the Public Works Minimum Wage Act without the prior consent of the employee.