

July 12, 2010

Mr. Dan Herrera
Albuquerque Journal
P.O. Drawer J
Albuquerque, New Mexico 87103

Dear Mr. Herrera:

Catalyst for Change

Bernalillo County government is now being tested by fire. While the past several weeks have been challenging, to say the least, the good news is that I am confident that the changes that come out of this controversy will move County government another step towards professionalism, transparency and accountability.

Many residents of Albuquerque don't see the full reach of their county government. Counties in New Mexico conduct critical functions that benefit residents and businesses and many of those go unnoticed and unheralded. In almost every case that is because the work is done by dedicated staff that functions effectively in their respective positions. In rare instances, however, problems have gone unchecked.

Public safety functions are among the County's core responsibilities and the jail, the Sheriff's Department, and the County Fire Department consume more than 50% of Bernalillo County's budget. The recent controversies surrounding staffing of the MATS program and indictments of a jail employee indicate a very real need for procedural changes and effective enforcement of County personnel policies. To date, we have seen discipline for some, but not all of the County employees involved. A spanking by the media is a poor substitute for sound County management and the County Commission, not the newspaper, has the duty to hold management accountable.

I have been assured by the County Manager that the full report on the Jamie Dantis investigation will be released to the public. Transparency is essential to governmental accountability. You can't have one without the other.

In addition, I have asked the County Attorney to conduct a thorough review of personnel policies regarding nepotism, background checks, and sexual harassment, and to review procedures for disciplining County employees who violate policy. At our first August meeting, the Commission will take up those issues and I urge the public to get and stay involved.

Change is hard, but the serious breaches of policy in the Public Safety Department have shown that change is necessary if we are to restore the public's trust in county government. Bernalillo County's commitment to open and ethical government is being tested. We can ill-afford a lackadaisical attitude of "if it's not really broken, don't fix it" at this crucial juncture. The reality is that we've learned that something is broken, that policies were disregarded and oversight failed.

Bernalillo County has received a jarring wake-up call. Only by stepping up now and meeting challenge of change can we restore trust and confidence in the important and ongoing work of the County and its many dedicated employees. In so doing, we will give those employees who embrace such improvements an enhanced level of security and pride that seldom surfaces when such work is off the public radar.

Over the past several years, county government has made great progress in becoming more professional and I see the current situation as an opportunity to drive greater improvement - a catalyst for real change and a firm mandate for better County government. These challenges can't be tackled by retreating from public view or fiercely defending the county from criticism. They can only be addressed through an open and systematic examination of practices at their core.

To this end, county management and the county commission will work together to create a culture of accountability. As a commissioner, I respect the County Manager's responsibility to direct personnel issues. However, it is the Commission's job to put into place clear, comprehensive, and enforceable personnel policies and procedures that will reward talent and hard work, while protecting good employees and the taxpayers who fund county operations.

I am committed to honest and in-depth inquiry into these issues. My constituents are asking many good questions - hard questions - about what will be done to change the system that enabled the current situation. They have a right to good answers. I want to be able to assure them that the events that occurred won't happen again. That can only be accomplished through a thorough and open examination of County policies. That is simply good civics.

Maggie Hart Stebbins

Vice-Chair, Bernalillo County Commission