

KNOW YOUR STATE AND LOCAL GOVERNMENT - Bonnie Burn & Marjorie Burr, Co-Chairs

We met with Adrian Edwards, M.D., president, Academy for Learning in Retirement (ALR) and Mary Paulson, member of the Curriculum Committee, in the summer of 2009, and inquired about collaboration in a government course. During March 2010, Spring Term, the course was presented on March 15, 17, 22, and 24. It was an educational, interesting experience that attracted a total of 300 people for the four 1-1/2 hour sessions. It is impossible to include all of the information that was presented, so a brief summary and introduction of speakers follows.



Jess Williams, public information director, Doña Ana County, opened the first session with a quiz about county government—24 multiple choice questions. This was an entertaining method for imparting fairly “dry” information. His job requires that he orient all new county employees, so his acquired experience was evident. We had lots of laughs that morning, but came to understand the size, operations, and obligations of our county government. Did you know that the County owns an airport located in Santa Teresa that alleviates traffic from the El Paso airport by accepting cargo planes? Is your street sign red or green? Red means privately owned, you maintain it; green means county owned, county maintains.

An overview of the City of Las Cruces government was presented by city manager, Terrence Moore. A brief history of the evolution of the council-manager model of government, along with a short presentation of the city’s organization chart, details of the budget process and a slide



presentation that updated all of the ongoing projects gave us new insights into the vitality of city government.

The state portion of the course was broken into two separate sessions: Jose Garcia, Ph.D., Department of Government, NMSU, gave an overview of state government including the judicial system, taxes, the two-party system and current issues (e.g., corruption and budget shortfalls). Two focal points, however, were the State Constitution that provides for independently elected officers (e.g., a governor,

attorney general, treasurer, and many agencies). Direct lines of control, communication, and policy coordination do not always exist. The second interesting point is the news media. The Albuquerque media market covers 45% of the state. In southern New Mexico, there is no single market. El Paso media covers southern New Mexico, and local political news is sometimes omitted. The predominant Hispanic population has no unified presence in the media. Nationally, local news is left out. In the current markets where reporting is shifting from in-depth to byte-sized, and bloggers, twitters, and other forms of new electronic media are taking hold, there is no money for paying reporters to carry out in-depth reporting. All of this affects the quality of government.



The state budget process and achieving funding for legislation that passes the hurdles of the legislature were the focus for Ruth Hoffman, director, Lutheran Advocacy Ministry, Santa Fe. She described the components of the budget, outlined the budget cycle, explained the executive and legislative budget formation, identified the various committees in the House and Senate that are involved with the budget, and gave details about two significant bills: HB1 – Feed Bill that pays the expenses for a legislative session, and HB2 that includes all of the House Appropriation and Finance Committee (HAFC) recommendations for general funding.



At the end of the four sessions, we came away with a broad overview of government in New Mexico. Two recommended books for further education are:

1. *Governing New Mexico*, edited by F. Chris Garcia, Paul L. Hairs, Gilbert K. St. Clair, and Kim Seckler, 2006, New Mexico Press, 314 pages, paperback.
2. *Citizen’s Guide to the New Mexico State Budget*, New Mexico Voices for Children, (2008), 33 pages.

Democracy is not a spectator sport!