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### In Case You Missed It

## Rep. Wilson: Restoring ethics: Eight ways to clean up Santa Fe

*We have had single-party rule by Democrats in the legislature in Santa Fe for too long. It's time to clean house. ... [F]or the last seven years we've had a governor who is focused on what New Mexico can do for him and not what he can do for us. That's backwards and it needs to change.*

Albuquerque, NM— Today, an op-ed authored by former U.S. Representative Heather Wilson was published on the prominent political blog, [NMPolitics.net](http://NMPolitics.net). In her piece, Rep. Wilson outlines eight tangible ways to rid this state of corruption and clean house in Santa Fe.

Rep. Wilson's op-ed is printed below in its entirety.

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## Restoring ethics: Eight ways to clean up Santa Fe

*NMPolitics.net*

**By Former U.S. Rep. Heather Wilson**

April 28, 2010

Read online at: <http://www.nmpolitics.net/index/2010/04/restoring-ethics-eight-ways-to-clean-up-santa-fe/>

When it comes to public corruption, New Mexico keeps turning up on the wrong lists.

Two former state treasurers and the former president pro temp of the Senate are serving time in Federal prison. The former secretary of state is under indictment. Investigations continue into whether any crimes were committed when civil service retirement funds and the state's rainy day fund were invested with firms that got the work because of their political connections rather than their investment acumen.

Public corruption, and a reputation for tolerating public corruption, slows business investment and job creation in New Mexico. If people believe that they will be shaken

down for business permits or that they have to grease palms in order to get government contracts, they will invest and grow elsewhere. Corruption wastes tax dollars and undermines the legitimacy of our government.

When misuse of office for private gain becomes “just the way we do things here,” it is very difficult to root it out. So far, the proposals to address this endemic problem have not gone far enough. Citizens should demand a comprehensive approach to promoting ethical behavior in state government and deterring, detecting and punishing public corruption.

### **Structural reforms**

First, the next governor must establish a code of ethics and a statewide ethics program that brings ethics and values into decision making in the workplace. A code of ethics would be short, compelling and based on values rather than a long list of rules.

Values-based ethics is much more important than compliance-based behavior. When there is a strong ethical culture in an organization, employees are empowered to engage their peers and take action to resolve problems. Employees who tell the new guy, “Hey, we just don’t do things like that here,” are far more effective than external review groups and formal enforcement mechanisms.

Second, New Mexico should pass a Civil Service Protection Act. A civil service act would prohibit solicitation of contributions or political activity by elected leaders from the civil servants who work for them. It would clearly prohibit use of taxpayer resources for campaign purposes and would prohibit civil servants from running for partisan office while in a civil service position.

Such an act would also prohibit putting political employees into civil service jobs for which they are not qualified and strengthen whistleblower protections for employees who report corruption or misuse of taxpayer funds to authorities.

Third, we need an Integrity in Contracting Act that would prohibit government from awarding or denying taxpayer-funded contracts based on the political affiliations or contributions of businesses. It should be illegal for an elected official or political appointee to seek to influence who wins a state government contract. Contracts should be awarded to get the best value, the best service and the best price for the citizens of the state.

Fourth, the New Mexico Legislature needs some structural reforms. Most importantly, it must strengthen its oversight activities. We have a part-time, citizen Legislature. But the Legislature focuses almost exclusively on the budget and crafting new laws.

There is no Government Reform and Oversight Committee that constantly shines a light

on problems that need to be fixed. There should be. Creating strong competing forces in different branches of government deters corruption and makes it more likely that malfeasance will be uncovered.

The Legislature also needs to change its rules on committee assignments so that the majority does not decide the assignments of the minority members. The speaker of the House has too much power to punish minority members who ask embarrassing questions. That power needs to be checked.

The majority and minority should negotiate the number of seats on each committee and the separate caucuses should assign their members to committees. A strong minority makes corruption harder to hide.

Fifth, we need real gift rules in state government. Every day when the Legislature is in session, different groups put gifts at the desks of members. Some of them are quite lavish.

Public service should not be a source of private gain – whether that is lift tickets at a ski resort or an expensive shotgun for the governor’s birthday. Allowing gifts creates the expectation that people seeking to influence the government must pick up the tab, and it creates the perception that gifts buy favorable treatment.

Sixth, New Mexico should establish by statute an Office of the Inspector General, and the inspector general should be appointed or elected for a fixed term not contiguous with the governorship and should be responsible for reviewing and testing the integrity of state and local governments. An inspector general could receive and review anonymous complaints, require the production of documents and root out waste and corruption.

While the state auditor looks at finances, an IG could look at compliance with other policies like procurement, personnel policy and regulatory compliance. The existence of multiple organizations and competing political forces can help deter corruption and root it out where it exists.

### **Our responsibility as citizens**

Seventh, we have a responsibility as citizens. Strong civic institutions that monitor government and expose corruption, including but not limited to a free and independent press, play a vital role in promoting ethics in government.

We need to strengthen our freedom of information laws and open government statutes so that it is not possible for elected officials to stonewall legitimate requests for publicly releasable information. Transparency and access to information reduces corruption. Sunlight is a good disinfectant.

At a personal level, it takes courage to stand up to government officials who ask for

something of value in exchange for their official actions. Some people don't think they can afford to risk their livelihoods by resisting an implicit or explicit "quid pro quo." But corruption only continues if we tolerate it. At a minimum, there is a duty to report possible corrupt activity to the FBI.

Finally, there is no substitute for ethical leadership. In my experience, there is no correlation between integrity and ideology. I have served with Democrats who value honor and Republicans who don't. But there is a correlation between corruption and power. For some people, power tends to corrupt.

We have had single-party rule by Democrats in the legislature in Santa Fe for too long. It's time to clean house.

And in the executive branch, for the last seven years we've had a governor who is focused on what New Mexico can do for him and not what he can do for us. That's backwards and it needs to change. We need a governor who is a servant leader, who doesn't expect his or her friends to get wealthy because they won an election.

We need a governor who doesn't want a free lunch and wouldn't take one if it was offered.

While there is no single-point solution that will establish a culture of high ethical standards in state and local government, it is well past time to change the rules of the game.

*[Wilson](#) represented New Mexico in the Congress for 10 years and is a former cabinet secretary in state government.*

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