

Improve what Works Fix what Doesn't



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We are facing some very big issues here in Catron County and many of them are at - or soon could be – near crisis in scope. There is no room for *business as usual*.

Among others:

1. County Manager Vacancy

2. Long Term Plan for the County

3. Grant Writing

4. Infrastructure

- a. Roads management
- b. Waste management

5. Emergency Services

- Recruitment
- Retention

6. General Health and Wellness Services

- a. Aging population (68% of residents over the age of 60)
- b. 'Part time' Health Services
 - No hospice
 - No palliative care
 - No hospital post-discharge care
 - No senior in-home care
 - No wellness monitoring
 - No referral to higher care from home visits

7. Little economic growth (Businesses and Tourism)

- a. Economic Development Committee does not exist and a Chamber of Commerce does not exist
- b. Existing businesses are not promoted, new business is not encouraged
- c. Natural resources and Resource Tourism not generally promoted
- d. Youth see little reason to stay in County

Let's talk details...

1. County Manager Vacancy

- Catron's pay scale is 30% less than the lowest salary of any New Mexico County (by a 2015 Resolution). Our most recent County Manager left for almost a 50% increase in salary and benefit. How do we recruit and retain good people at approximately half the going rate?

Recommendation:

Determine the 'true cost' of hiring and retaining competent and experienced personnel. Are we simply creating a 'revolving door' that, once trained the resource leaves for more attractive positions?

2. Long-Term Plan of Operations for the County

I recently requested a copy of the County's 3, 5, 10, and 20 year Plan. In short, it doesn't exist.

How can we make anything other than reactionary decisions when we can't foresee any future options? We can't foretell, but we certainly ought to be projecting favorable outcomes with contingencies for less favorable!

3. Grant Writing

Most County Governments – of any size – depend a great deal on State and Federal grants to supplement revenues and County Programs. Our grant-writing is handled by County staff – staff that are already stretched thin and may have only a cursory understanding of the grant process much less *effective* grant writing.

I would propose we consider retaining an independent grant writer with a proven track record to represent the County. Of course, if we don't have a Long Term Plan, it will be a waste of money.

4. Infrastructure

a. Roads

The County is responsible for maintenance of 900+ miles of roads. In a Federal / County partnership this includes BLM / National Forest roads. Funding for this responsibility comes from State budgets. In 2016 the County received \$1,100,000 – 100% of which was used for road maintenance. In 2017 we received \$47,000! (This is not a typo). The County had to make up the difference.

Recent lobbying efforts have resulted in a restoration of these funds; however, that does not mean what is given this year won't be taken away next. (As of 3/29/18, the full amount was received but guaranteed for only two years).

Recommendation(s):

Road maintenance funding is critical to the safety and welfare of all who live here and all who travel through. A home-grown and ongoing lobbying effort by all citizens of Catron is necessary to assure that funding is renewed.

b. Waste Management

I don't think anyone needs a review of the realities of our waste issues. Alternatives to the way we are doing things now are slim. We do not have a waste dump in the County (and we have to pay \$30,000 a year for 30 years just to test the old ones – as directed by the EPA); therefore, all waste collected must be transported to Arizona. It is a costly solution.

Recommendation(s):

Think creatively! When Pie Town's Convenience Station was closed, the community came together and suggested that a dumpster be leased from the County, manned by volunteers and picked up as any other in the County. I was proud to be a part of this proposal and, rumor has it, this proposal may be shortly implemented.

In the long term, the most likely solution for waste management and treatment is an incinerator. Incinerators of this type reduce the volume of waste by 80%-85%. This is a costly system, but again, the *true cost* of

current methods needs to be analyzed and projected over the decades that they must be utilized.

Additionally, it has been proposed that a glass-crushing plant (machine) be purchased. Glass is a heavy part of waste (reducing transportation costs) and if we utilize such a machine, the resulting materials can be used for road fill! I played no part in this proposal, but it is another example of creative thinking for 'old problems.' We just need to make it happen.

5. Emergency Services

Our emergency services personnel – Fire and EMS – are exceptional in dedication, passion and training. I know... I've had to depend on them! But we are near-crisis in almost every jurisdiction in the County.

- Recruitment and Retention programs are not formalized and failing us.
- Many of our ambulances are at risk of failing in systems and even failing to run when needed. New safety requirements are rapidly making our ambulances obsolete.
- Our all-volunteer staff are paid for required ongoing training only if it is in the County Budget. In many cases training is out-of-pocket. (State Fire Funds and NM EMS Funds cannot be used to pay any kind of stipend or salary.) *It should not cost to volunteer!*
- Our all-volunteer staff are aging and some will retire, leaving departments at risk of being de-certified. (For example, Datil is at risk and Pie Town is at risk of being de-certified because of lack of staffing. This means that Quemado – if they are able – would potentially have to service all calls! Datil has 2 years to train up personnel. Pie Town has about 3-5 years. Quemado about the same. If we don't act now, we won't have trained staff – or Emergency Services.) Plan and act NOW for this potentially disastrous public safety outcome.

Recommendation(s):

1. Formalize a recruitment and retention program to include 'career days' at our schools. The New Mexico Workforce Connection will pay 16-24 year olds who sign up for our Fire and EMS programs – at NO COST to the County. (This also partially addresses 'youth flight' after graduating from

High School. We need to find reasons for our youth not destined for higher degrees to remain in the County and have a true career.

I want to also propose how we can pay those in training and, eventually, our Fire and EMS personnel - *without* expense to the County! This Program will be discussed below and under separate cover – tentatively entitled “Catron Para-medicine Program”.)

2. The budget has to be found to upgrade ambulances, lifting systems and other emergency equipment. Our volunteers themselves are at risk of injury in some cases. Moreover, this is a patient care issue. New safety standards for patient safety in case of a wreck are going into place in the next few years and our ambulances won't meet those standards.
3. Catron County is the only county in New Mexico that does not contribute to Public Employee Retirement Association (PERA) fund for EMS (PERA is already in place for Fire). (Motivation for retention)
4. It should not cost volunteers to serve this county! A little extra will go a long way to cover out-of-pocket expenses. (Motivation for retention).
5. EMS volunteers receive little or no stipend for ongoing training classes – unless specifically indicated in the County Budget. The issue here is that budgets are tight and seem to get tighter every year.

6. General Health and Wellness Services

Recommendation(s):

I am proposing a “Catron Para-medicine Program” which is a comprehensive Program that encompasses many elements of Catron’s healthcare system – both existing and proposed. Granted, it is very much a ‘Grand Vision,’ involves Federal Funding, State Funding, Public / Private initiatives and will require multi-year execution. Because we are a census-designated ‘frontier’ (less than 6 people per square mile) (we are actually approximately .5 people per square mile), we are eligible for Federal Funding and grants to augment our all-volunteer services and increase health coverage for our aging population. Discussions have already been initiated with Federal Agencies, Medicaid, and potential Private Sector providers, State Representatives.

As this program develops, more detail will be presented.

7. Economic Growth (Businesses and Tourism)

There simply are no formal programs to encourage new business, support existing businesses, or encourage tourism for the County. I would propose that such a 'Plan for Economic Growth' and a 'Plan for Tourism' be developed with goals and anticipated results and metrics to measure success. These must be incorporated into our County's Long Term Plan.

Summary:

Rural communities everywhere are struggling to keep their Cultures, Traditions, Identity and People. Most of those who were born here and never left, those who left and came back, and those that have chosen Catron County as 'home' did so for very many of same reasons. It is an exceptional place to live and play, to retire, to raise children, to do business... but it is also fragile. Unmanaged growth could easily destroy the attraction. Unsustainable growth of business and tourism or population is just as dangerous. There must be a balance found so that the County thrives as an entity, provides the needed and necessary services to its Constituents, and forever serves as a 'Jewel in the Frontier'.

How do we do this?

By continuously Improving What Works and Fixing What Doesn't!

The Very Best to You and Yours...

Now, go out and vote your conscience!

Austin LADD Roberts

A handwritten signature in blue ink that reads "A. Roberts". The signature is stylized and cursive.