

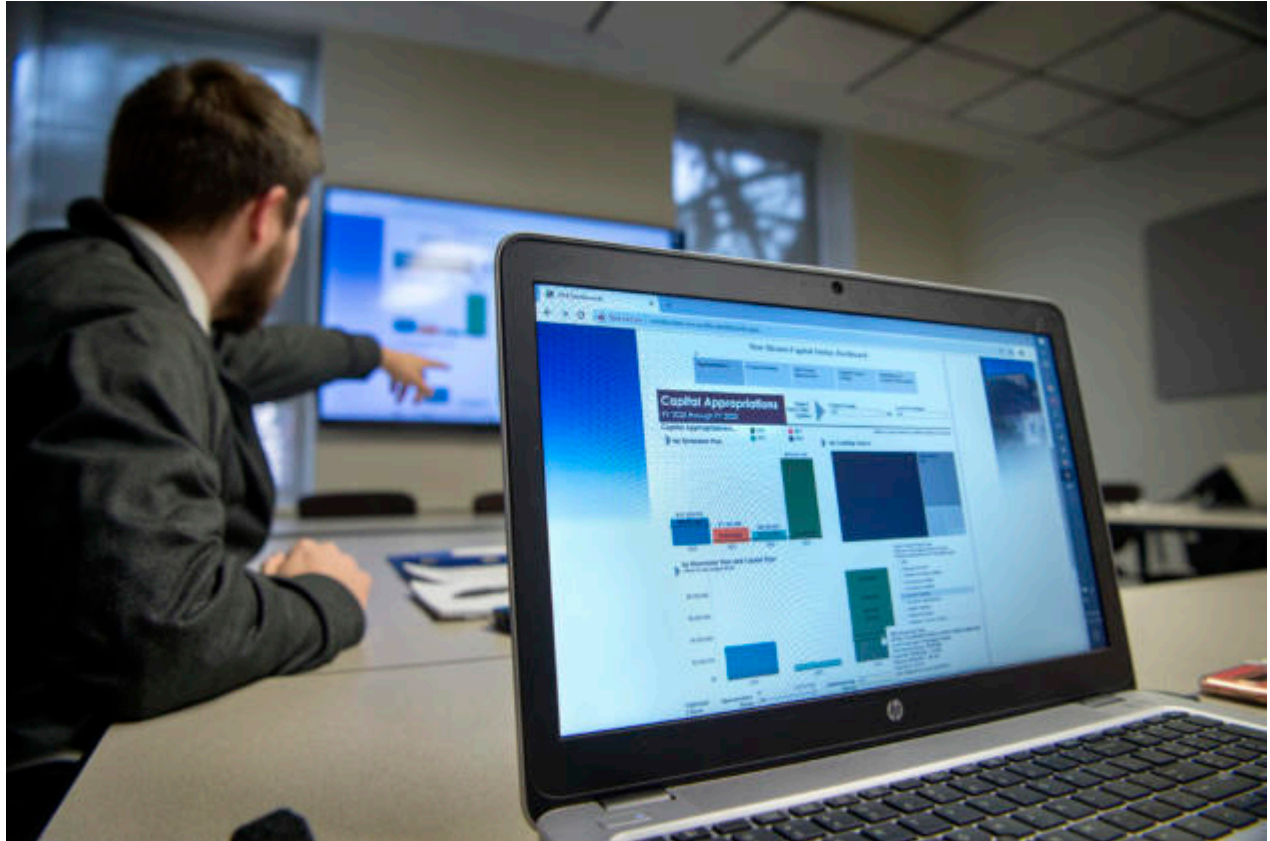
# NM unveils tool to track capital spending

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BY DAN MCKAY / JOURNAL STAFF WRITER

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Tripp Stelnicki, a spokesman for Gov. Michelle Lujan Grisham, explains a new online tool aimed at allowing the public to track New Mexico's capital outlay spending. (Eddie Moore/ Albuquerque Journal)

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**SANTA FE – New Mexico authorized about \$369 million in 2016 to pay for road construction, building renovations and other capital projects.**

**But more than \$105 million of it remains unspent.**

**That's according to a new transparency web page launched Friday by Gov. Michelle Lujan Grisham's administration – an effort to make it easier for the public to track how New Mexico handles its capital outlay money.**

It's a notoriously opaque part of state government.

State executives said Friday that they hope the new website – available through the Department of Finance and Administration – adds a dose of accountability to state agencies and local governments overseeing capital projects. A legislator or neighborhood leader, for example, might see a project that doesn't appear to be moving forward and ask about it.

“If we're not moving money out the door, that's a problem,” Lujan Grisham said in a written statement.

There are a host of potential explanations for why a project might be stuck in neutral or not have spent its full appropriation.

The money approved by lawmakers might not be enough to complete the project, for example, or a contractor might have been hired but not yet paid. In some cases, the state can't release the money to a local government because of a problem with the local agency's audit.

And sometimes a state agency – such as the Department of Transportation – have paid for a contractor to do the work but not yet filed for reimbursement through the capital outlay process.

Nonetheless, the amount of unspent money highlights how long it takes for projects to reach completion.

Some projects don't appear to be close, even years after the appropriation.

In 2016, for example, lawmakers authorized \$229,000 for a gun violence memorial in Albuquerque and \$130,000 for a multipurpose center at Cottonwood Classical Preparatory School.

But both projects remain in the planning stages, and none of the money has been spent, according to the transparency website.

The state borrowed money for the projects in 2016 by selling severance tax bonds – a financial mechanism that allows the state to repay the debt with tax revenue from oil, gas or other material taken out of the ground.

The appropriation for both projects must be spent by June 30, 2020 – the end of this fiscal year – or it will be made available for other purposes.

The new Capital Outlay Dashboard includes tabs that allow viewers to sort by the year an appropriation was made and how much has been spent. It's meant to be used by government employees and members of the public.

The site also includes a “reversion year” – the deadline by which the money must be spent before it’s made available for other projects.

The online dashboard also outlines a variety of projects that have spent their full appropriation.

The state, for example, spent the full \$27 million appropriated in 2016 for an interdisciplinary science building at the University of New Mexico and all \$121,200 earmarked for Zia Little League in Albuquerque.

Of the \$369 million appropriated in 2016, about \$264 million has been spent.

New Mexico’s capital outlay process has faced intense criticism for years – about a lack of coordination between state and local governments, a lack of transparency and whether the priorities actually address serious state needs.

The new transparency tool doesn’t solve those concerns, some of which would require action by the Legislature.

Earlier this year, the state Senate rejected a proposal to require lawmakers to publicly disclose how they allocate their share of infrastructure money. It had passed the House without opposition.

Lujan Grisham, a Democrat who took office this year, said the new website will at least allow people to better track what’s happening – or not happening – with their tax dollars.

“When we make it possible for the people to keep a watchful eye on these projects,” she said, “we’re taking an important step toward making sure the funding the Legislature appropriates is being put to its intended use – in a timely fashion.”

Launch of the web page comes as New Mexico prepares for a spending spree on roads and other capital projects, fueled by revenue from an oil boom in the Permian Basin.

Lujan Grisham and legislators this year approved about \$925 million to pay for infrastructure projects throughout the state.