

# Muñoz takes reins of Senate Finance Committee

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Sen. George Muñoz, D-Gallup, shown speaking on the Senate floor in this February 2020 file photo, was appointed Tuesday as chairman of the Senate Finance Committee. He is one of four new Senate committee chairs. (Eddie Moore/Journal)

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**SANTA FE –** Following in the footsteps of a legislative icon is no easy task, but Sen. George Muñoz said Tuesday he won't try to be John Arthur Smith.

Muñoz, a Gallup Democrat, was appointed as the new chairman of the Senate Finance Committee, and he said he plans to make changes in how the panel operates.

“In (the committee) you’ll see a lot more transparency and a lot more people informed about the things they’re passionate about,” Muñoz told the Journal.

The decision to elevate Muñoz could rankle some progressive Democrats, as Muñoz has voted in the past against bills dealing with expanded firearm background checks and repealing a long-dormant state abortion ban.

He was also one of six Senate Democrats targeted in last year’s primary election – and the only one of the six to survive such an intraparty challenge.

Smith, the influential former chairman of the Senate Finance Committee, was among those ousted.

Despite the election drama, Muñoz, a businessman who was first elected to the Senate in 2008, said his focus is squarely on New Mexico and ensuring the state recovers from a revenue downturn caused by the COVID-19 pandemic and lower oil prices.

“I’m going to be fair to everybody,” Muñoz said in an interview. “The elections are over and I don’t have any grudges.”

Senate President Pro Tem Mimi Stewart, D-Albuquerque, said eight senators had expressed interest in the Senate Finance Committee chairmanship, including five current members.

After interviewing most of those interested in the job, Stewart said she ultimately picked Muñoz in part because he had been the committee’s vice chairman.

“He was in line, and in the end that was one of the reasons I chose him,” Stewart said.

But she also said Muñoz “understands” Senate Democrats’ priorities and had committed to bringing more transparency to the committee’s work.

In all, four new committee leaders were appointed in the Senate on Tuesday. The other three were:

- ◊ Senate Rules Committee – Daniel Ivey-Soto, D-Albuquerque.
- ◊ Senate Tax, Business and Transportation Committee (formerly known as Senate Corporations and Transportation Committee) – Sen. Benny Shendo, D-Jemez Pueblo.
- ◊ Senate Indian, Rural and Cultural Affairs Committee – Sen. Shannon Pinto, D-Tohatchi.

The House also made some changes to committee leadership.

Rep. Angelica Rubio, D-Las Cruces, will lead the Transportation, Public Works and Capital Improvements Committee, replacing Patricio Ruiloba, an Albuquerque Democrat who left the Legislature after a paperwork problem knocked him off the ballot.

Democratic Rep. Javier Martinez of Albuquerque will also take over as chairman of the House Taxation and Revenue Committee. He served as co-chair last year with Rep. Jim Trujillo, a Santa Fe Democrat who retired.