

Ronchetti addresses business leaders, realtors at forum; Lujan Grisham absent

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Mark Ronchetti, the Republican nominee for governor, begins a forum hosted by area real estate and business leaders by bringing out a poster of Gov. Michelle Lujan Grisham to poke fun at her absence Monday at Marriott Albuquerque. The poster was quickly taken down by event organizers.

Javier Gallegos/The New Mexican



A man pulls down the printed out poster of Gov. Michelle Lujan Grisham moments after presenting it on stage at the start of the NAIOP forum Monday. The poster was met with audible chuckles from the large audience in the Marriott Albuquerque

Javier Gallegos/The New Mexican

ALBUQUERQUE — A gubernatorial forum Monday before key players in New Mexico’s business and commercial real estate industries had all the elements expected at such an event: rubber chicken, expensive suits and schmoozing.

There was one notable exception: One of the candidates, Democratic Gov. Michelle Lujan Grisham, was a no-show.

Not in person, anyway.

As the forum was about to get underway, Republican Mark Ronchetti's campaign manager mounted a picture of Lujan Grisham on the stage before event organizers quickly took it down, generating laughter from the audience of about 375.

The forum, held at the Marriott Albuquerque, was hosted by a commercial real estate group best known by the acronym NAIOP, along with 18 other organizations.

Carla Sonntag, president of the New Mexico Business Coalition, one of the forum co-hosts, said it was "very unfortunate" for the governor and the state of New Mexico that Lujan Grisham didn't attend the event.

"Those people that were in the room were a great variety of business leaders from all walks of life and all party affiliations, and they're truly trying to make a decision this fall, and I wish she would have been there," Sonntag said.

Rep. Stefani Lord, R-Sandia Park, said Lujan Grisham "missed the mark."

"I thought it was appalling that she couldn't take the time to meet with the Realtors and the developers and the builders and the contractors and the people that build our cities and our state," Lord said.

Sonntag said Lujan Grisham's decision to skip the forum will factor into her ballot choice in November.

"It certainly weighs on me that a candidate doesn't care enough to show up when given the invitation, and that invitation was extended several months ago," she said.

Lance Sigmon, NAIOP's chairman-elect, apologized to the group for Lujan Grisham's absence.

"I personally felt very strongly that the governor should be here to give an accounting to the business community for the last four years [and, if reelected], let us know what she plans on doing for the next four years," he told the crowd.

"I just felt the business community was owed this, and I'm sorry I couldn't deliver on this," Sigmon added. "But her opponent, Mark Ronchetti is here, and I wanted to thank Mark for being here."

Sigmon's comments drew applause.

NAIOP's executive director, Rhiannon Samuel, said Lujan Grisham's campaign was made aware of the forum's date after it was determined last year.

"There was one point during this past year where we were considering other dates to see if we can better work with her schedule ... but her campaign didn't get back to us by the time we needed to book the event space, which was just a month in advance," Samuel said.

Delaney Corcoran, a spokeswoman for the governor's reelection campaign, offered a different explanation.

"We were working with NAIOP on two dates for the forum, but they ultimately declined the date that the campaign agreed to," she said in a statement. "We let them know that Governor Lujan Grisham would be happy to find an alternate date to meet with NAIOP board and members."

Delaney declined to disclose where the governor was or what she was doing Monday. Her press secretary, Nora Meyers Sackett, declined, too.

“The campaign would be best suited to answer that for today’s schedule,” Sackett wrote in an email.

In a brief interview after the forum, Ronchetti called the governor’s decision to not show up at the forum disappointing.

“I think at when you look at where we were in COVID and how tough it was on small businesses — this is the heart of small business in New Mexico — and to not show up shows, I think, she’s tone deaf,” he said.

Corcoran said the campaign negotiated with NAIOP in good faith.

“Governor Michelle Lujan Grisham looks forward to publicly debating Mark Ronchetti in the fall to highlight the clear distinction between her record of delivering progress on the economy, education and health care with Ronchetti’s inexperience and far-right views,” she said.

Ronchetti’s lack of business and political experience was among the questions he faced during the forum.

“I think we’re at a point now where it’s very simple, and the choice we have to make is someone who’s willing to fight for the people of this state,” said Ronchetti, a former longtime TV meteorologist.

“Does it help to have government experience to do that? My answer to that is clearly not,” he said. “Look at where we are with this governor and her 25 years of political experience. ... We’ve had, what, four secretaries of education? We have an issue across this state where we have crime that’s out of control and education that’s now 51st. You don’t have to have government experience to listen to the people of your state and fight for what’s best for them.”

While Lujan Grisham declined the invitation to attend, long-shot Libertarian gubernatorial candidate Karen Bedonie wasn't invited.

A Republican member of the governor's Cabinet, however, did attend the forum. John A. Garcia, secretary of the New Mexico General Services Department, sat at the same table as Ronchetti.