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Train Plan Puts Sandoval on Gov.'s Express

By Joshua Akers

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Outbound Sandoval County Commission Chairman Daymon Ely has a \$6 million holiday bonus planned for Gov. Bill Richardson—a train.

But the county's lone Republican commissioner, Dave Bency, said the money proposed to buy the train should instead go to county road projects or be split among county residents.

Ely, whose term expires at the end of December, wants the commission to spend \$16 million on the governor's plan for a commuter train between Belen and Santa Fe.

About \$6 million of that money would buy an engine and two cars, Ely said.

"This has nothing to do with politics and everything to do with public policy," Ely said Tuesday. "This rail project may be the most important public works project in New Mexico in a generation."

Ely said the governor's rail plan calls for the state to buy two engines as well as train cars. Sandoval County's contribution would purchase a third engine and cars for the project.

He also said he hoped the money would buy the county an ownership stake in the rail system.

"It shows we want to be a part of this system, but we also want some say over the system," Ely said. "What it does is improve economic development in Sandoval County. Business will come where the dirt is cheap, if we can get the people there, and the cheap dirt is in Rio Rancho."

Billy Sparks, spokesman for Gov. Bill Richardson, said late Wednesday he wasn't familiar with the specifics of Ely's proposal. But "the governor is interested in having rail service as soon as possible in that corridor," he said.

The money proposed for the project is part of an \$80 million pledge to the county by Intel as payment in lieu of taxes.

The company offered the money to the county in exchange for a \$16 billion industrial revenue bond, which gives the semiconductor giant millions of dollars in property tax breaks over the next 30 years.

Sandoval County officials have talked about using some of the Intel money to provide shuttles along N.M. 550 and N.M. 528 to get people to the train. They've also discussed funding railroad track improvements, park-and-rides in Rio Rancho and the construction of a commuter station in Bernalillo.

Ely's plan would spend \$10 million on those improvements and an additional \$6 million to buy an engine and train cars.

The \$6 million for an engine and cars upset Bency and two Rio Rancho city councilors.

"I give the governor props for trying to do such a major project, but I have a problem with giving \$6 million for an engine and cars," Bency said Wednesday. "We are already planning on building the Bernalillo station and doing a million dollars in track improvements. Isn't that enough of a buy-in?"

Ely said the county needs to do everything it can to ensure the rail system is viable.

"If every community acts as if it is all the state's responsibility, then this won't work," Ely said. "By putting this money into the rail, it makes sure that we have a system that is viable and we get a tremendous benefit out of this."

But Bency said he would have a hard time telling county residents to pay for access to the train and to pay for the train.

"If we are not willing to switch \$6 million from the choo-choo train to the Northwest bypass, we should give back that \$6 million to every resident in Sandoval County," Bency said. "... They can buy gas if they don't want to ride the train and if they do, they can spend it on tokens."

Bency said the county could call it the "Intel rebate."

The Northwest bypass, also known as the Northwest Loop, would connect U.S. 550 and Interstate 40 by way of the Rio Puerco.

Ely said neither of Bency's ideas solves the problems faced by the county.

"Which is going to help people: \$200 or \$300 today, or a rail system that will improve economic development in this area for years to come?" Ely said. "There has to be balance between providing people services and keeping people's taxes low, and this is an opportunity to do both."

Two Rio Rancho city councilors said Bency's refund idea would be the most beneficial to their constituents and the county.

"That plan lets you do everything you want to do, plus it's a novel idea and it helps everyone in the county," said City Councilor Howard Balmer.

Councilor Michael Williams said Ely's plan to buy a train would be a waste of money. "We hear time and again from the County Commission that people can't afford this and that," Williams said. "If you're indigent, you're not going to be riding the train."