

## **Presentation of Long-Term Recovery Economic Development Strategies**

To NM Legislative Interim Committee on Economic Development and Policy  
Rep. "Moe" Maestas, Chairman

Student Union Ballroom, New Mexico Highlands University  
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By Elmo Baca, Chairman  
Las Vegas NM Community Foundation

Good morning, Chairman Maestas and members of the committee, and welcome to our beautiful historic city that has endured many challenges in our history but stands today proud and resilient as ever:

I am Elmo Baca, Chairman of the Las Vegas NM Community Foundation. I was also recently appointed Co-Chair, along with Dr. Bill Taylor, of the San Miguel County Hermit's Peak and Calf County Long Term Recovery Group.

I am honored to have this opportunity to share some of our community's progress in response to these massive wildfires, which as of June 14, had burned 341,000 acres in San Miguel, Mora and Taos Counties, had destroyed at least 903 structures and damaged 85 more. Our federal partners at FEMA reported a week ago that 1755 families in San Miguel County and 1448 families in Mora County had registered for federal assistance. These numbers are expected to increase before the FEMA registration deadline on August 5.

On April 24, two days after 70 mile per hour gale force winds exploded the wildfire and threatened our beloved Montezuma Castle, the Board of Directors of the Las Vegas Community Foundation established the Hermit's Peak Wildfire Relief Fund. That same week, the wildfire made national headlines as it rapidly spread through the Pendaries Valley, destroying homes at Pendaries, San Ignacio and Rociada. Within days it would threaten historic villages of Mineral Hill, El Porvenir, Gallinas, Ledoux and Chacon. President Biden declared the fires a federal disaster area on May 5.

Within hours of establishing our Hermit's Peak Wildfire Relief Fund, the Las Vegas Community Foundation began receiving online donations from all over the country, from as little as \$10 to \$10,000. Quite a few of our donors were alumni from Highlands University and the United World College; others were generous people who instructed us to help those families in dire need, as quickly as we could.

Since May, our community foundation has awarded about \$300,000 in emergency relief grants to 21 nonprofit organizations in San Miguel and Mora Counties to provide essential services of water, food, shelter and transportation. We will have to raise much more money, supplies,

construction materials, forestry products and volunteer labor as out community transitions to Long Term Recovery.

### Long Term Recovery

Besides the needs of our county residents impacted by the fire, our Las Vegas Community Foundation has also been working with other partners on strategies to enhance our local economy. There are three strategies we see as critical to diversifying and sustaining our Long Term Recovery, and these are: housing development, film production and film tourism, and forest conservation and management.

Housing supply is a critical issue here in Las Vegas, as it is elsewhere in New Mexico, but perhaps even more important with the loss of so many residences in the wildfires. As we all know, Las Vegas has a wealth of historic homes, but during the pandemic our inventory of available homes on the market was depleted as many new residents chose to relocate here. There are very few attractive or affordable homes for sale in San Miguel County in 2022.

I am sure you are aware of the challenges that housing developers face in New Mexico, including a lack of available licensed contractors, lack of skilled labor, soaring building materials costs, lack of available building sites, and so on.

Recently the City of Las Vegas revealed that over 500 structures within the city limits are abandoned and are suffering from demotion by neglect. Historic preservation of these underutilized residential and commercial properties could offer not only a partial remedy for our housing shortage but could also provide some badly needed artisanal construction training, jobs and investment.

Just this summer, within the past few weeks, a proposal to develop a Heritage Trades Academy as a joint program of New Mexico Highlands University and Luna Community College has gained momentum. Dr. Sam Minner, President of Highlands University, and Dr. Edward Martinez, President of Luna Community College, are working with a dedicated group of local volunteer historic preservation experts to explore developing and funding the Historic Trades Academy. Both educational institutions have enthusiastically endorsed the concept and have pledged available resources, but the schools will need some help from the Legislature to adequately fund the program.

The Heritage Trades Academy is conceived as a dual certificate program, one focused on heritage trades, and one focused on heritage economic development. The first step identified and agreed upon by both institutions is to hire a consultant to do a feasibility study of the Heritage Trades Academy this fall in anticipation of the 2023 Legislative session convening in January. An estimated budget of \$70,000 for the consultant study is proposed.

At its special board meeting on June 29, the Las Vegas Community Foundation pledged \$10,000 towards the consultant services in support of the Academy. Matching pledges from Highlands

and Luna Community College have been committed, and we are seeking the final gap support from the Santa Fe Community Foundation and the state's All Together New Mexico Fund.

Today we are respectfully asking the committee to support a budget request of \$617,000 to fund the Academy's Director, faculty positions, administration and student stipends.

### Film Production and Film Tourism in Las Vegas

Besides housing, another major industry that impacts Las Vegas and San Miguel County is the motion picture and television industry otherwise known as "Hollywood" or "Tamalewood." Las Vegas boasts a long list of outstanding movie features that have been shot here, ever since 1913 and 1915 when producers Romaine Fielding and Tom Mix made silent movies here.

During the pandemic in 2020 and 2021, when most businesses were shut down, Las Vegas hosted film crews for the television shows "Roswell, New Mexico" and "Outer Range." "Outer Range" was especially beneficial, as film crews filled our local hotels for weeks at a time, and local businesses were generously reimbursed for inconveniences such as street closures and parking lot access.

Since the state tax credits for film production were renewed and enhanced by the Legislature and Governor Lujan Grisham in 2019, New Mexico has enjoyed dramatic new investments for the industry including the arrival of Netflix studio and New Mexico Film studios in Albuquerque, and also last spring's announcement of the \$40 million funding for the Next Generation Media Academy in Albuquerque.

Las Vegas would like to leverage our compelling filming locations, southwestern landscapes, historic buildings and our educational institutions to increase our film production capacity and also our film tourism appeal.

In the 2019 Film Tax Credit bill, Las Vegas was *excluded* from the beneficial 5% Rural Film Tax incentive bonus. Basically Las Vegas is too close to Santa Fe to qualify for the rural tax credit. We are respectfully asking this committee, the Economic Development Department and the New Mexico Film Commission to investigate the possibility of amending the Rural Film production tax credit to include Las Vegas, and perhaps add additional incentives for film and TV production in disaster impacted areas like San Miguel, Mora, Lincoln and Colfax Counties.

Another way the Legislature can help Las Vegas is to support our underdeveloped film tourism potential. Some of us have dreamed of having a New Mexico Film and Television Museum here. We have a long history of impressive movies, like "Easy Rider," "The Hi-Lo Country," "No Country for Old Men," "Hostiles," and others that can interpret the rich cultures of New Mexico. As you are aware, our state's cultural institutions, museums and theaters are concentrated in Santa Fe and Albuquerque.

A New Mexico Film and Television Museum in Las Vegas would boost the economy of our community and all of northeastern New Mexico. We are respectfully asking the committee to consider an appropriation to fund a feasibility study for a New Mexico Film Museum in Las Vegas.

### Forest Rehabilitation

Finally, I just want to share a few notes on forest clean-up, rehabilitation, and conservation. New Mexico Highlands University houses a fabulous resource called the New Mexico Forest and Watershed Restoration Institute. This is a federally funded program administered by the state's Forestry Division. Other Forest and Watershed Restoration Institutes are located at Colorado State University and Northern Arizona University. The staff at Highlands includes six professionals who interface and collaborate with federal and state land management agencies, municipalities, and tribal governments on public education, forest and landscape planning and rehabilitation, how-to workshops, and GIS mapping.

I had an opportunity to visit with the staff of the Forest and Watershed Restoration Institute a few days ago. I asked some basic layman's questions, and I learned that the past 3 years have been challenging for forest thinning projects in the Southwest due to a logging moratorium to protect the endangered Mexican spotted owl, and also during the pandemic many skilled forest conservation workers left the industry. So the serious lack of labor capacity in related forest industries will be a challenge for a few years to come, but also an opportunity for economic development.

Last week we learned from FEMA that New Mexico will receive funding for forest restoration projects on private lands from the USDA through the Farm Service Agency. This program is called the Emergency Forest Restoration Assistance program. It's the first time New Mexico has been awarded these funds. Private property owners can apply for assistance up to \$500,000 for approved projects such as road repair, fencing, soil and sediment conservation, seeding and replanting of new trees. Applications for projects are now being accepted by our local Farm Service Agency through September 2<sup>nd</sup>.

The challenges for the Emergency Forest Restoration program is that there's a learning curve for the application process. Also there's a 25% private match required for approved projects. For all forest and land rehabilitation work our local Forestry, Farm Service Agency, Soli and Water Conservation Districts are critically understaffed to process and review applications for assistance, make site visits and advise impacted property owners.

The sheer magnitude of the Hermit's Peak and Calf Canyon fires have severely tested San Miguel and Mora Counties, as well as our federal and state agencies. We are profoundly grateful to everyone nationwide and locally who have offered help and resources, but we are especially grateful and most indebted to the 3,200 men and women fire fighters, their support crews and many volunteers who braved horrific conditions to help save countless people,

livestock, homes and ranches. In our darkest days, we witnessed countless acts of courage, generosity, sacrifice and love that we will never forget.

Thank you Chairman Maestas, members of the committee and the Legislative Council Service for this opportunity.

I am happy to answer any questions.