

Diane Denish's fight to reform the Regional Housing Authorities

While serving as a member of the Las Cruces Housing Authority, Frances F. Williams of Las Cruces became aware that something was horribly wrong with the operation of the state's Regional Housing Authorities, which operated independently and with little oversight.

Williams had good reason to believe that the Executive Director of the Albuquerque-based Region III Housing Authority was misspending taxpayer dollars on vehicles, high salaries and other perks instead of on affordable housing for New Mexico's working families.

Williams began calling elected officials and newspapers to make her case. And when Williams called Lt. Gov. Diane Denish, she took action. According to Williams: "Diane did what nobody else had the courage to do. Without missing a beat, Diane took action. That meant standing up to members of her own political party, but Diane didn't care – she was determined to clean up the Housing Authority and protect housing for thousands of New Mexicans who didn't have a voice."

That's exactly what happened.

Diane contacted State Sen. Mary Kay Papen (D-Las Cruces) and worked with her to craft legislation to bring unprecedented oversight to the Housing Authority. Republican State Rep. Janice Arnold-Jones (now a GOP candidate for Governor) sponsored a House version of the bill.

As expected, there were powerful legislators who tried to kill the reform bill and protect the status quo at the Housing Authority. According to the Santa Fe New Mexican, Denish was quick to stand up to members of her own political party. The paper wrote: "Denish especially has been vocal about the issue," and reported that Denish said that those legislators who voted against it "have essentially refused to protect the taxpayers' money in the future." [Santa Fe New Mexican, 3/15/07] Leading legislators initially failed to approve an overhaul of the Housing Authority, a move that Denish called "shameful." [Albuquerque Tribune, 3/14/07]

But Diane didn't give up the fight.

As the Albuquerque Journal wrote, Denish spent the last few days of the legislative session pushing lawmakers to support Housing Authority reform. [Albuquerque Journal, 3/29/07] Her efforts paid off, and in the early morning on the final day of the session, the bill passed with bipartisan support. The bill instilled strict oversight over the Housing Authority, including taking away the Authorities ability to issue bonds and requiring the Authority to get approval before entering into any large contracts.

On March 28, 2007, when the Governor was out of the state, Diane signed the Housing Authority bill into law. Even leading Republicans were quick to praise it. House Republican Floor Leader Dan Foley said: "I think the greatest ethics bill that came out of this session was the housing authority (legislation)." [Silver City Sun-News, 3/17/07]

In 2009, Diane teamed up with Senator Papen again to finish the job they started in 2007. Another reform bill was passed unanimously and signed into law to expand oversight and protect taxpayer dollars from corruption in the Regional Housing Authorities.

As it turns out, audits turned up even more apparent instances of corruption and misspending at the Regional Housing Authorities. The State Auditor then turned over the findings to both the Office of the

Attorney General and the FBI. Attorney General Gary King later indicted former legislator and Region III Housing Authority Director Vincent Smiley Gallegos and three others for a range of charges – including charging that Gallegos directed almost \$600,000 to himself for salary and benefits.

Upon learning of the indictments, Denish said: “This is a sad day for New Mexico. However, this makes it clear that this sort of behavior is unacceptable and will not be tolerated in New Mexico. The people of this state are open and honest and they deserve a government that is equally open and honest.”

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