

'New Mexico Magazine' chops staff

By Steve Terrell | The New Mexican

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New Mexico Magazine, the nation's oldest state magazine, is known for promoting the Land of Enchantment's dramatic skies. On Tuesday, dark clouds rained over the magazine's Santa Fe offices, as seven of its 17 staff members learned they're out of work.

Stunned, somber editors and administrators, some of whom had worked for the tourism-oriented publication for decades, packed books and other belongings into boxes minutes after Tourism Department Secretary Monique Jacobson handed out layoff letters.

"This is a weird way to end my career," a longtime editor whispered.

They were among 27 workers cut Tuesday by the State Personnel Board, which chopped 11 full-time positions at the state Tourism Department, which oversees the glossy publication, website and assorted enterprises, and 16 full-time jobs at Expo New Mexico, which puts on the State Fair and manages the fairgrounds in Albuquerque.

This year's job cuts are the first for state workers with civil service protections since the economy nose-dived and lawmakers began cutting agency budgets three years ago to plug revenue shortfalls.

The layoffs represent more than 40 percent of *New Mexico Magazine's* staff and a third of the permanent workers at the fair.

Jacobson, a 32-year-old Taos native with a background in marketing, told the Personnel Board that the bulk of cuts at her department will come from the magazine, which has lost \$1.4 million during the last two years.

The magazine has operated as an enterprise fund, which means it is supposed to pay for itself through newsstand sales, subscriptions and advertising sales.

Clear out by 5 p.m., magazine staff members were told Tuesday, but take extra time if needed. A state police officer and a state building services employee were stationed outside the Lamy Building "just in case," a General Services Department spokesman said.

The current administration, which took office in January, in May hired a new editor, Dave Herndon, a veteran of various publications who moved to New Mexico from Florida and is paid a salary of about \$92,000 a year. The highest-paid classified editing job at the magazine pays \$46,700 a year, according to the state's online Sunshine Portal.

Asked whether losing 40 percent of its staff would affect *New Mexico Magazine's* mission of promoting the state as a tourist destination, Jacobson told reporters that the job cuts will make the magazine "run more efficiently."

"We've hired new leadership to improve the quality of the magazine," she said.

Twenty-five year employee Emily Drabanski, one of the laid-off staffers, said Tuesday that she was in the middle of work on the magazine's annual Vacation Guide, which this year will be called the *Travel Planner*. A "rough mock-up" was in a pile of papers on a desk in her office. "I don't know who to give this to," she said.

"Don't give it to anyone," another laid-off employee said sardonically. "That's their problem now."

Other longtime magazine employees who were let go include managing editor Walter Lopez and editor Arnold Vigil. Both said the layoffs came as a surprise.

Jacobson said there is no plan to privatize *New Mexico Magazine*, which has been a state publication since July 1923.

The secretary told the board that laying employees off isn't something she would do "without having exhausted all other options." She said the magazine had cut back on printing, advertising and other expenses in recent months.

"We simply don't have the funding to keep running the department like this," she said.

Jacobson said New Mexico ranks 38th as a destination state for tourism, and "we really need to turn that around."

Among jobs eliminated in the Tourism Department on Tuesday was one associated with the federally funded Scenic Byways program. The program will go back to the Department of Transportation, Jacobson said.

Tuesday's cuts will leave the Tourism Department with 76 full-time positions, she said.

Gov. Susana Martinez has proposed merging the Tourism Department with the Cultural Affairs Department. Jacobson wouldn't speculate about further job cuts if that proposal becomes reality. A bill to merge the departments has been introduced in the current special session of the Legislature, but so far there has been no movement to consider it. Lawmakers rejected a similar proposal during the regular session earlier this year.

Dan Mourning, interim general manager of Expo New Mexico, said the State Fair is nearly \$2 million in the hole. The layoffs in that agency are necessary to keep it afloat.

Union representatives at Tuesday's meeting said full-time workers are being replaced by temporary workers, some of whom they say have been hired, let go for a brief period, then rehired. Jon Hendry, president of the New Mexico Federation of Labor, said some "seasonal" workers at the fair have been working on this basis for as long as six years.

An American Federation of State, County and Municipal Employees news release Tuesday said personnel rules and the union contract with the state prohibits reductions in force if there are temporary workers employed.

Mourning denied that was the case.

The AFSCME statement predicted the layoffs wouldn't save the state money because contract workers would have to be hired to do some of the work done by the laid-off employees.

The first state layoffs began in June, when 47 employees of the Education, Economic Development and Regulation & Licensing Department and other agencies were laid off.

Of those, all but 19 have been rehired in other state jobs, personnel office staff said.

Hendry said in almost all cases, those who get rehired by the state go to lower-paying jobs.

The Associated Press contributed to this report.

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