

Stakeholders Express Reservations and Concerns

Prepared by the New Mexico Route 66 Association

On Tuesday December 12, 2023, the first meeting of the Route 66 Coordination Group (New Mexico Route 66 Centennial Coordination Group) was held at the State Capitol building in Santa Fe with an agenda to introduce group members to the public, review, and vote on bylaws, and discuss the Federal Route 66 Commission's centennial recommendations. The public was not impressed when three of the board members showed up 20 minutes late, along with Federal Centennial Board Vice-Chair Jen Schroer, and one group member who did not attend.

The Route 66 Coordination Group was established by Governor Michelle Lujan-Grisham with Executive Order 2023-131 with the overall mission to "recommend, plan, sponsor, and coordinate official Route 66 centennial events, programs, and activities in the State." The directive to "sponsor" activities is undefined in the sense that the group is unfunded. The Executive Order's only tangible deliverables are a "supplemental document" containing specifics pertaining to the actions of the group and to "submit meeting minutes, recommendations for state signature centennial projects, and other regular reports to the United States Route 66 Centennial Commission and/or its working groups." This seems to suggest the group will only be producing documents. This could be disappointing to Route 66 communities who would be justified in expecting more from the Centennial Coordination Group.

The Executive Order specified a 12-member organization with six members from the public sector and six members representing state agencies. The appointment of several members of the group is perplexing. Two group members were appointed representing Native American interests. These members have affiliations with San Idelfonso, Pojoaque, and Santa Clara pueblos—none of which are located on Route 66. Pueblos such as Laguna and Santo Domingo as well as the Navajo Nation,

all located on Route 66 and having a historical connection to Route 66, were inextricably overlooked.

The appointment of Johnny Peña is baffling. Mr. Peña, husband of Albuquerque City Councilor Klarissa Peña, is a board member and past president of the West Central Community Development Group (WCCDG) that is being paid \$500,000 a year to operate the West Central Route 66 Visitor Center that has been characterized as a "boondoggle" and a "monument to waste" by the Albuquerque Journal. The Visitor Center site dedication and design kickoff was held on Dec. 21, 2018. As of December 2023, under WCCDG management, the \$13 million dollar center is yet to open its planned tap room, amphitheater, museum, and banquet hall. The current WCCDG executive director, when asked about the sustainability of the Visitor Center, said, "I don't know. It all depends on how popular Route 66 really is." Apparently, Mr. Peña represents an organization that is uncertain about Route 66's popularity.

The Tourism Department is represented by two members. The New Mexico Route 66 Association has a history of attempts to work with the Tourism Department, presenting ideas that have proved successful in other Route 66 states. Unfortunately, they were not interested. Currently, the tourism department is not pro-actively featuring Route

66 as a touring destination unlike the Oklahoma Tourism and Recreation Department that publishes a stand-alone 63-page Route 66 tourism guide that is offered in German, Spanish and English. In the next legislative session, the tourism department is requesting \$5 million for Route 66 promotion.

An egregious omission for representation on the Centennial Group is a representative of the New Mexico Route 66 Association, a non-profit 501(c)(3) corporation acknowledged as the subject matter experts on historic Route 66 in New Mexico. The Association has earned both national and state-wide awards and recognition for Route 66 preservation and tourism projects. It has received and executed grants from the National Park Service, the National Trust for Historic Preservation, the New Mexico Tourism Department, and the Federal Highway Administration's National Scenic Byways agency. The Association publishes the magazine "Route 66 New Mexico" and distributes thousands of copies, without cost, at visitor centers along the Route 66 corridor. The magazine serves as the main resource for Route 66 travel information at the state and local visitor centers.

The meeting provided a forum for each Group member to introduce themselves and review Group bylaws. What stood out in the bylaws



Left to Right: Evan J. Williams, Scott Verhines, Elmer Torres, Johnny Peña, Alicia Ortega

presentation is the opening mission statement. "The overall mission of the Group is to assist the United States Route 66 Centennial Commission by identifying activities, projects, and events that will properly honor and celebrate the Mother Road of the United States for its centennial anniversary." It would be reasonable to assume that New Mexico Route 66 stakeholders might take offense with that overall mission statement expecting that the overall mission of the Centennial Group should be to focus on assisting New Mexico communities celebrate the centennial.

The Centennial Group discussed the Federal Route 66 Commission's recommendations. These recommendations were originally created by The Route 66 Road Ahead Partnership of which Association President Melissa Beasley-Lee has been an active member of for the last 7 years.

Toward the end of the meeting was a short time for public comment. Unfortunately, there was no dialogue between the speakers and the Centennial Group.

The first person to speak was Beasley-Lee. During public comment, she presented a written 14-point New Mexico Route 66 Fact Sheet to the Centennial Group members and in public commentary highlighted these Association attributes to the board:

1. "The Association has been here for nearly 35 years assisting and promoting the route,
2. We house a wealth of information about Route 66, are networked with the other seven Route 66 State associations, three National associations, and more than 25 Route 66 International associations and groups,
3. We understand the Route's complexity of being a moving entity stretching over 2,400 miles through eight states, and how we in New Mexico, can capitalize on our 604 miles,
4. I am the board member of the Route 66 Road Ahead Partnership, the group that has been working for the past seven years on centennial celebrations, created everything for the centennial including forming the bill to create the Federal Centennial Commission, as well as creating and conducting current programs that are helping businesses and communities prepare NOW, leading up to 2026, and
5. We represent Route 66 businesses, communities, and historic locations and understand their needs and what makes them thrive and prosper."

She also said she submitted a draft of a bill through a state senator during the 2023 New Mexico legislative session, "to create our State Centennial Commission which would follow the lead of the Federal Commission, while focusing on the needs and unique traits within our state." The text of the bill was modeled after bills passed in

other Route 66 states, but the New Mexico bill was not acted upon with no explanation as to why. The board appeared shocked and puzzled following her comments. Beasley-Lee asked if the board had any questions or comments. They did not.

Mike Lee, President and CEO, and co-owner of Fast TV Network Inc., also spoke. He said: "We are currently building a film studio in Carrizozo, New Mexico, and have purchased a property in Tukumcari to build our headquarters and studio space and are donating space for the Official State New Mexico Route 66 Association Museum and Welcome Center that will be housing their massive collection of Route 66 history."

"We have filmed episodes of our hit show "Legends of Route 66" across all eight Route 66 states. We have witnessed countless success stories as well as failures to small businesses on the Mother Road. Human stories. The one

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common thread is that these business owners have invested their hard-earned money, sweat equity, and countless hours a week bringing needed services on Route 66. New Mexico Route 66 businesses have been hit especially hard. After all, we were shut down longer than any of the eight states during COVID. The centennial is our opportunity to invest in Route 66 communities and provide help to bring celebrations, restoration projects, and new life to our beloved road."

"It is good to see that we are finally forming this committee. However, it needs to be noted that we are extremely late to the party regarding the other seven states. We have a committee that is made up of political representatives and some who are here looking for money for their own projects. What I don't see is any representation from Gallup, Grants, Moriarty, Santa Rosa, Tukumcari, San Jon, Bernalillo, Los Lunas, or the nine Native Nations located along Route 66."

"I also don't see the president or a representative from the New Mexico Route 66 Association, who have nearly 35 years of expertise in preservation, promotion, and stewardship of Route 66. The same Association that has been a participant in the Route 66 Road Ahead Partnership for the last seven years, which formed the National Centennial footprint to begin with. Oklahoma, Arizona, Texas, Illinois, Missouri, Kansas, and California have been working on this for several years. The State of New Mexico, up to this day, has not done anything for Route 66."

"New Mexico True Magazine from our tourism department barely mentions that Route 66 even exists. They cut the funding to our Association's quarterly *New Mexico Route 66 Magazine*, the only Route 66 publication in the state. Yet we still went out and sold advertising to Route 66 businesses and communities who have precious few dollars to begin with to continue publishing it. The magazine that I might note is still delivered to the I-40 corridor state welcome centers at Glen Rio and Manuelito, the Albuquerque downtown visitor center, Old Town, and Sunport, as well as the Santa Fe visitor center, Bernalillo visitor center, and various Route 66 businesses throughout the state, all on our volunteer's dime."

"So, I will ask you a question. Are we here to help the communities and businesses of Route 66 across the entire 604 miles of the New Mexico stretch of the Mother Road? Or are we going to funnel funding to Albuquerque and Santa Fe concerns and let these communities go it alone? If that is the case, then there is something extremely wrong with our state government. I am here to ask you respectfully to prove me wrong. Help these communities make this centennial a success story. Listen and include those who have invested their lives making Route 66 a better place by adding the New Mexico Route 66 Association as their representative on this group board."

Debbie Pogue, owner of the Sunset Motel in Moriarty said, "if you want to learn about what travelers, including international travelers from all of the world, are coming here to see, you need to speak with the Route 66 businesses owners." She shared the motel's history of being the oldest motel continually run by the same family in all the route throughout the eight states.

David Brenner shared the history of the Roadrunner Lodge Motel, purchasing it when it was a rundown eyesore at the request of his now ex-wife Amanda, and how they worked hard to turn it into a top-ranking Route 66 motel that has won various awards and competitions from *USA Today* and the New Mexico Route 66 Association to name a few.

"Dave Nidel, a former New Mexico Route 66 Association President said he felt "the meeting was a little dysfunctional and that the Governor-appointed Board is starting late in the planning, almost an



Left to Right: Raymond Mondragon – Vice Chair, Bill Lee – Chair, Lansing Adams, Ricky Serna, Patrick Moore, Daniel Gutierrez. (Not present: Danielle Gilliam)

afterthought. During the meeting I did not observe a strategy for obtaining funding from this 2024 State Legislature, much less a suggested amount of funding. If the next time this Board is scheduled to meet is February 29, what are they thinking? The 30-Day Legislature will be nearly ended!”

“We have a solid opportunity to drive an agenda that this Board demonstrated at this meeting obviously does not have in place but has a mission with no funding to back it up. Worse of all, not one of these appointed seat warmers pledged money or other resources from their organization in support of the NM Route 66 Centennial! Did you get the impression that every one of these Board members was thinking ‘What’s in this for me and my cause?’ I did.”

Nidel added, “I served as President of the (New Mexico Route 66) Association in 1992 when Route 66 was celebrating its 66th Anniversary. We lobbied the New Mexico Department of Tourism to promote the commemoration of this event - as every other Route 66 State BUT New Mexico was planning. Our efforts fell on deaf ears. The Department of Tourism instead spent lots of money on the Columbus Day Quincentennial which went over about as well as a turd in a punch bowl.”

Donatella Davanzo, a Route 66 research specialist, and New Mexico Route 66 Association member, who recently relocated to New Mexico from Italy, attended the Centennial Coordination Group meeting.

“From the onset of discussions, the agenda to celebrate the Route 66 Centennial that the members of the group presented and discussed seemed to me just an initial phase,” Davanzo said. “Considering that the centennial is in 2026, I found their plans “out of time” and probably very late to organize all the tasks that the group mentioned: ceremonies, media production, commemorative items such as coins and stamps, collaboration with the other states’ of the Route 66 corridor, and other projects to promote Route 66 and New Mexico as well.”

“Another item I want to point out is the overview focused more on tourism and capturing the attention of travelers from other countries during the centennial anniversary. Route 66 has been for years, and still is, the primary topic of my academic studies and documentary research. Traveling on the route in New Mexico, I visited several commercial businesses in operation. Talking with the owners, they explained to me how

their economic conditions and the status of the old properties are very critical.”

“When I listened to the comments of Melissa Beasley-Lee, Mike Lee, and Debbie Pogue who spoke during the ‘public comments,’ they were very clear in raising the issues that effectively affect the road and the communities that are challenged to survive. While they were talking, I looked at the members of the group who were listening. There was a sense of surprise in their faces. It seemed that they were listening to something totally unexpected. After these speeches, it became more evident to me how the start of the Coordination Group’s works to organize the centennial celebrations was not only extremely late but also avoided considering the real situation of Route 66 and the communities in New Mexico and the urgency to preserve them both.”

The key takeaways from the meeting, and the review of the Executive Order are as follows.

1. The Governor is to be commended for acknowledging the significance of the Route 66 Centennial and establishing a centennial advisory group through Executive Order 2023-131.
2. The staff appointments to the Centennial Group suggests a less than rigorous selection process.
3. Most Centennial Group members have not demonstrated any prerequisite experience or knowledge of Route 66 history, Route 66 culture, available Route 66 economic impact data or what factors drive Route 66 tourism. With these limitations, the Centennial Group’s ability to serve as an advisory resource is uncertain.
4. Confidence that the Centennial Group deliverables will be useful to the stakeholders has not been established.
5. The Centennial Group is an unfunded organization, which impacts its potential effectiveness.
6. The action items for the Centennial Group seem to be limited to the conduct of community meetings over the next two to three years.
7. The Centennial Group has not defined a task list, milestones, or timelines for the work to be performed as is the practice for project management.
8. A measure of the effectiveness of the Centennial Group will be a report on what the Centennial Group has accomplished between December 12, 2023, and the forthcoming

meeting scheduled for Feb. 29.

After listening to the public input, some board members said they were going to “reach out” to the Association and stated that they wanted to “work together.” At the meeting’s conclusion, Association President Beasley-Lee spoke with Federal Centennial Board Vice-Chair Jen Schroer about the elimination of the Association seat from the State Commission Group. She replied self-satisfyingly, “I’m not part of this group so there is nothing I can do”. Other board members dodged the question and claimed that “their hands are tied.”

“Route 66 communities were ‘cut out’ with the coming of the interstate,” Beasley Lee said. “Following this meeting, it has been made obvious Route 66 communities will be ‘cut out’ once again with the coming of the centennial.”

“The New Mexico Route 66 Association will continue to focus and invest in its Route 66 communities with what has been originally laid out for centennial preparations and celebrations on a national level. We currently have promotional and preservation projects in the works and have new projects lined up to launch in 2024.”

“Route 66 businesses who are not currently members of the association are invited to contact the Association to learn how to get their business involved and represented. Same goes for individual members. We are always excited to have new members joining our circle of like-minded, extended family.”

“We also ask those who are financially able to contribute to the New Mexico Route 66 Association to accomplish the centennial projects originally laid out that will be launched in early 2024. Details of these projects will be announced in early 2024.”

The next state centennial group meeting is scheduled for Feb. 29 in Tucumcari.

More information will be provided on the New Mexico Route 66 Association website’s “Centennial” page, rt66nm.org/centennial, when available.

A full list of New Mexico State Centennial Coordination Group board members and their current position is listed on the New Mexico Route 66 Association Website: rt66nm.org/centennial.