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SANTA FE — **New Mexico** taxpayers this past year saw little good, plenty of bad and a whole lot of ugly.

A review of the Top 10 stories covered and uncovered by [New Mexico Watchdog](#)^[1] shows a parade of bad behavior and wasted money in the **Land of Enchantment**.

THE GOOD, THE BAD AND THE UGLY: A glance at the Top 10 New Mexico Watchdog stories for 2013 is mostly a compendium of bad news for taxpayers across the state.

But to show we're not overly cynical, we give credit where due. After all, in 2013 the New Mexico Legislature managed to do something that most other states have not: It passed state pension reform.

That kicks off our Top 10 list:

10) The Pension Fix

State-sponsored pension plans across the country are hemorrhaging money. Illinois, for example, is facing a [\\$100 billion shortfall](#)^[3], which has [caused a major ratings agency to downgrade](#)^[4] the state's credit rating because the government worker retirement system's debt is "unsustainable."

Heading into last January's legislative session, New Mexico faced a \$12 billion hole in its **Public Employee Retirement Association** and **Educational Retirement Board** pension plans. But led by state **Sen. George Muñoz, D-Gallup**, who even [garnered support from the state employees union](#)^[5], a pension fix wended its way through both chambers and was [signed Republican Gov. Susana Martinez](#)^[6].

Critics on the left say the legislation was too draconian, and fiscal hawks say it didn't go far enough but the state Supreme Court last week turned back a challenge from disgruntled retirees and upheld the law. New Mexico has its problems but in this instance, it distinguished itself by addressing a looming crisis other states have ignored.

9) Drunk or Stoned On The Job? No Problem!

Don't get too excited about legislative efforts, though. A number of common-sense measures didn't survive the session, including a bill introduced by **Rep. Dennis Roch, R-Texico**, to clarify language in the **Workers Compensation Act**.

The bill stemmed from a case in which a city sanitation worker in Las Cruces fell off a garbage truck and injured his head, wrists and a hip. Some [three hours later](#)^[7], the worker was found to have a blood-alcohol level of .12, well above the .08 limit in New Mexico for being legally drunk. But he still received [90 percent](#)^[8] of his workman's compensation claim, which cost taxpayers about \$90,000. Roch's bill was [tabled on a party line vote, with one Democrat telling New Mexico Watchdog](#)^[9] the legislation was "kind of overbearing and punitive."

8) Social Media Meltdowns

We're 14 years into the 21st century, so one would think just about everyone would know what goes out over the Internet stays on the Internet. Forever.

But a Republican political operative and the head of **Albuquerque Public Schools** committed blunders that left people shaking their heads. In April, [Steve Kush](#)^[10], the executive director of the **Bernalillo County Republican Party**, went on **Facebook** during a public hearing on raising the minimum wage [and called one liberal activist](#)^[11] a "radical bitch." Kush apologized, was suspended and eventually stepped down from his post.

Then, in November, **APS Superintendent Winston Brooks** nearly lost his [\\$250,000-a-year job](#)^[12] for [going on Twitter](#)^[13] and comparing the female secretary-designate of the **New Mexico Public Education Department** to livestock. "Moo, Moo, Oink, oink!!" the 61-year-old Brooks wrote in a message to a TV reporter while he complaining about being bored at a school board meeting. An uproar ensued, Brooks was suspended for three days and took down his Twitter page. It's still down today.

7) Tuition Sticker Shock

The cost of a college education is steadily rising, and a New Mexico Watchdog investigation showed that in-state tuition and fees have [gone up 169 percent at the University of New Mexico](#)^[14] in the past 15 years.

In the just about same space of time, in-state tuition and fees have [gone up by more than 120 percent at five of the six](#)^[15] publicly funded universities in the state.

"We are finding a growing part of our labor force who go to college and are ending up unable to get jobs in professional, technical and managerial levels," said economist [Richard Vedder](#)^[16] of **Ohio University**, who has been studying the rising costs of a college education across the country. "We've just come out a paper showing that there are 115,000 janitors across the country with bachelor's degrees." That won't make paying off those student loans any easier.

6) Disability Spike

The rising number of Americans receiving disability payments has skyrocketed.

In June, [New Mexico Watchdog took a look at the numbers](#)^[17] for New Mexico and learned the state has outpaced the country in the rate of people receiving benefits. Our review showed that between 2003 and 2011 (the most recent year available), New Mexico experienced an increase of 58.7 percent, compared to a 39.5 percent increase in national numbers. “We are not in position to say why the numbers have fluctuated 60 percent,” a spokeswoman for the **Social Security Administration** told us.

Then, less than a month later, [New Mexico Watchdog learned](#)^[18] that by the [Social Security Administration’s](#)^[19] own figures, the national [Disability Insurance Trust Fund](#)^[20] is on a path to go broke in fewer than three years. “This thing is a quite a mess,” said [Tad DeHaven](#)^[21], a budget analyst for the [Cato Institute](#)^[22]. “I’m not aware of any plans for substantive reform.”

EARLY RELEASE: Manny Aragon, who used to be one of the most powerful figures in New Mexico political history, has been released from a federal prison in Colorado.

5) Manny Aragon Released

This summer, New Mexico Watchdog heard rumblings that [Manny Aragon was in line](#)^[24] for an early release from prison. On Dec. 5, it happened.

The former state **Senate Pro Tem**, once considered among the most powerful political figures in state history, was [released from a federal facility in Florence, Colo](#)^[25], six months ahead of schedule. Instead of going to a halfway house, Aragon is free to live in his over-the-top “castle” in **Albuquerque’s South Valley**, where he will be monitored until early May 2014.

In 2008 Aragon pleaded guilty to charges of fraud and conspiracy for his role in a scheme to defraud the state out of nearly \$4.4 million in building the **Bernalillo County Metropolitan Courthouse**. He’s been ordered to pay restitution, of which Aragon is using part of his state-funded pension to pay off. Aragon receives \$27,311 per year, which totals more than \$204,000 since 2005.

The Legislature [has since passed a law](#)^[26] forcing public officials to forfeit at least part or all of their pay and pensions should they be convicted of felonies connected to their duties in office, but it was not retroactive to cases such as Aragon’s.

4) Convicted Mayor Gets Pension

Just a couple of weeks after the Aragon story broke, New Mexico Watchdog learned of a similar story concerning the former mayor of the New Mexico border town of **Columbus**. **Eddie Espinoza** was released early from federal prison after getting convicted of smuggling firearms to Mexico. NM Watchdog learned that despite the conviction, Espinoza still [receives a taxpayer-supported pension of \\$1,387.89 a month](#)^[27]— which works out to nearly \$17,000 a year.

Like Aragon, Espinoza was convicted before the Legislature passed its anti-corruption bill.

3) Tale of the Iguana Snatcher

If, say, a member of a high school basketball team got nabbed stealing something worth thousands of dollars, you can bet the player would get kicked off the team.

But when a member of **Pojoaque Valley School Board** was caught on security video absconding with a bronze sculpture of an iguana from outside a bar at the **Buffalo Thunder Resort and Casino**, he kept his job on the board.

After drinking one night in late September, **Jon Paul Romero** grabbed the iguana on his way out the door. After detectives found the iguana in Romero's living room, the school board member said he swiped the statue — estimated to be worth up \$5,000 — as a “prank.” Despite having a history of drunk driving arrests, Romero was not charged with theft. Instead, the **Santa Fe District Attorney** placed Romero in a pre-prosecution program, where non-violent offenders can avoid conviction by meeting certain requirements.

Even though the story was splashed across media outlets across the state, Romero refused to step down from the school board, which sets policy for students, teachers and administrators in the district. “It’s a personal matter and it has nothing to do with the board,” [Romero told](#) ^[28] [New Mexico Watchdog](#) ^[28]. The board said it had no authority to demand Romero's resignation and [issued a mild reprimand](#) ^[29], saying it “does not condone the actions of Board Member Romero.”

So Romero is still on the board while the iguana is back at the bar.

2) Conventioneering on the Taxpayers' Dime

[NetRoots Nation](#) ^[30] is one of the biggest liberal political conventions of the year, drawing progressives from all over the country for seminars with titles such as “Using Republicans' Own Words to Shut that Whole Thing Down.”

So imagine the New Mexico Watchdog's surprise to see that the [Rio Arriba County Commission approved all expenses](#) ^[31] for two county employees to attend the five-day convention in San Jose, Calif. **Lauren Reichelt**, the county's director for **Health and Human Services**, told NM Watchdog she lobbied the commission to send her to NetRoots Nation simply because “it's the very best conference for using social media, for working with communities ... It isn't for the political stuff.”

But it just so happens that Reichelt is the [vice chair of t](#) ^[32] [he county's Democratic Party](#) ^[32] and [blogs on the liberal DailyKos website](#) ^[33]. The NM Watchdog story [produced a storm of controversy](#) ^[34] in Rio Arriba County, prompting an editorial in the local newspaper that said, “To use taxpayer dollars to fully fund a trip for such blatant and scathing political reasons is a gross misuse of power.”

Reichelt and the other county employee still attended the convention, ut five months later the [county manager announced](#) ^[35] the commission won't approve any more trips to NetRoots Nation.

THE IRS IS WATCHING: In its investigation of the Albuquerque Tea Party, the Internal Revenue Service wanted more information about this 83-year-old retiree.

1) The Great Grandma and the IRS

The scandal surrounding the [Internal Revenue Service](#)^[37] allegedly targeting conservative political groups had a long reach — all the way to [an 83-year-old great-grandma in Albuquerque](#)^[38].

One of the aggrieved parties was the [Albuquerque Tea Party](#)^[39], which said the IRS besieged them with questions for four years about the group's nonprofit status. One of the queries from the IRS centered on the group's relationship to "**Marianne Chiffelle's Breakfasts.**"

New Mexico Watchdog started digging and discovered that "Marianne Chiffelle's Breakfasts" is not a restaurant chain but a great-grandmother and survivor of a World War II internment camp in the Pacific who organizes informal 9 a.m. meetings for members of the [Bernalillo County Republican Party](#)^[40] at the **Golden Corral on Eubank and Central Avenue in Albuquerque.**

"I was surprised about the whole thing," said the real, live Marianne Chiffelle, who readily admitted she's active in state GOP politics and hands out patriotic coloring books to kids in the area.

Chiffelle told New Mexico Watchdog she understands the IRS has a job to do but was bothered by the agency's drawing her into the investigation — and won't back down from expressing her views about the government and politics.

"Don't cut me short," Chiffelle said. "I was a prisoner of war in the second World War. If the Japanese (military in World War II) couldn't kill me, no one else can. That's my philosophy. If something is unfair, I will fight to the death."