

Retiring HED Boss Made Mark on Land, Government

By David Staats

At the Journals Capitol Bureau, June 1988

SANTA FE --- When Larry J. Gordon steps down as Secretary of the Health and Environment Department June 30, he will end a career as one of the most enduring environmental officials in New Mexico government.

To some, the 61-year-old Gordon is a consummate professional, a forceful advocate of environmental protection and health care. He is the person who brought morale building stability to HED after seven successive secretaries and numerous political battles under Gov. Toney Anaya.

To others, Gordon is an arrogant bureaucrat who specializes in toying to his superior's line, even at the expense of the environmental advocacy he makes his hallmark. To them, his tenure at HED has been a disappointment.

Gordon surprised officials and observers last month when he announced that he would step down after 18 months as head of state government's largest agency.

Gov. Garrey Carruthers said Gordon would be succeeded by Carla Muth, HED's deputy secretary.

Gordon said his resignation is for personal reasons, including "some family business I've been paying inadequate attention to," such as real estate.

Gordon, a democrat, said his resignation was not prompted by any personal or policy disagreements with Carruthers. The Republican Governor's election was opposed by environmentalists who feared he would impose James Watt-style policies in New Mexico. Carruthers was an assistant U.S. Interior secretary when Watt was secretary.

"He's been one of the greatest bosses I've ever had," Gordon said. "There has been zero political intervention. He has let me hire my own staff without regard to the party they belong to."

Nor is the retirement prompted by pension cares, he said. A bill introduced in the 1987 legislature would have Gordon and others to work as independent contractors instead of employees to lift their pension benefits. The bill did not pass. Gordon went on the state payroll

earning \$59,000 thousand a year contributing to the state pension fund, where he said he has built 41 years of service credit.

Gordon plans to retire to Albuquerque of consulting, backpacking, fishing, and some active duty for the Navy in public health.

The Oklahoma native spent a year as a high school teacher in 1949 before starting with the New Mexico Health Department as an entrance-grade sanitarian and working his way up.

In 1955, he became chief of Albuquerque's Health Department, a post he held until 1968. During his tenure, the department's name was changed to the Environmental Health Department and its duties and size grew dramatically.

He directed the Environmental Services Division of the former Health and Social Services Department under Republican Gov. David Cargo in the late 1960s. In 1971, under Democrat Gov. Bruce King, he became the first director of the New Mexico Environmental Improvement Agency. Gordon had proposed the agency to King after the 1970 election and the Legislature approved it.

"This was an effort to bring together diverse programs," he said of EIA, the predecessor of HED's Environmental Improvement Division. "The Agency got a significantly enhanced budget when it was first created --- EID was then and still is the most comprehensive, in terms of scope, state environmental agency in the nation. That's the way I designed it."

Gordon moved to the state scientific laboratory system in 1973 as its director. The legislature approved his plan to have one laboratory provide comprehensive services to state and local governments, including police and health agencies.

"In most states you find 10 or 12 labs doing the work we do in one," he said. "We have one of the best-equipped, most accurate labs in the nation today. New Mexicans should be very proud of it."

He later administered health and environmental programs in the Health and Social Services Department. In 1973, the Legislature

approved Gov. Jerry Apodaca's reorganization of state government and established HED. Gordon became deputy secretary, where he remained through 1982, the end of Bruce King's second term.

Gordon went back to his old Albuquerque job from 1982 to 1986. Carruthers tapped him to direct his transition team for HED after the 1986 election, and then appointed him secretary.

Over the years, Gordon has been instrumental in passing numerous state and local laws, including the state air and water quality laws and an occupational health and safety act. By any standard, his resume is impressive, with 21 professional memberships and affiliations and 15 awards. He was president of the American Public Health Association in 1980-81 and the association gave him its highest award in 1987.

Because of his record, Gordon's appointment to HED was greeted favorably by environmentalists, who had favored Democrat Ray Powell over Carruthers. But some had reservations.

Lynda Taylor, a representative of the Conservation Voters Alliance, said Gordon used to send her copies of his speeches about once a month, before he became secretary. She still has them, and occasionally consults them for inspiration.

Gordon contends his legislative achievements "have significantly improved the quality of our air, water, food and land, and have been of great significance in economic development."

But he acknowledges the state is doing "a very poor job" in managing solid and hazardous wastes, indoor radon pollution, underground storage tanks, occupational safety and health, and ground water pollution.

"We have the structure, the mechanism, but no money," he said. "We have significantly painful budget problems in this department.

Carruthers plans to introduce a prevention-oriented health package in the 1989 legislative session that will include improved funding for HED, he said.

Gordon has deliberately stayed out of Albuquerque's air pollution controversies since taking over HED. "The only reason the state

would step in there would be a failure to act."

He also stayed out of the limelight on other major issues facing the department recently, including care for the mentally ill and the future of the Environmental Evaluation Group, the scientific group that monitors the Waste Isolation Pilot Plant on the state's behalf.

The low profile reflects Gordon's desire to delegate responsibility to subordinates. Muth has handled the mental health issues, while Kirkland Jones, deputy director of the Environmental Improvement Division, took the lead on EEG before Carruthers, facing congressional pressure, agreed to transfer EEG from HED to the New Mexico Institute of Mining Technology.

Gordon also has re-opened the department to the news media, ending a prior policy that restricted press.

Leonard Napolitano, dean of the University of New Mexico Medical School, credits Gordon with bringing experience and stability to HED and for taking an active role in the board overseeing the Office of the Medical Investigator at UNM.

"He's one of the country's leading public health experts with particular emphasis on prevention of disease and maintenance of health," Napolitano said through a spokesman.

Howard Shaver, president of the New Mexico Hospital Association agreed.

"He's always been a professional first, committed to the job in a professional way," Shaver said. "The state has been well-served by him."

The state laboratory has been funded consistently by the Legislature and never has become a political football," Shaver said. "That's a credit to how it got set up by Larry," he said.

Selma Sierra, Carruthers' deputy for public affairs, said Gordon has been one of the administration's best Cabinet secretaries. Carruthers wants Gordon to keep working with the administration after June 30th in an advisory or part-time capacity, and Gordon said he has agreed, although details haven't been worked out.