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 **News**



## Nuclear Option



A resolution to oppose pit production at Los Alamos National Laboratory heads back to the drawing board

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Workers with EM Los Alamos Field Office cleanup contractor Newport News Nuclear BWXT Los Alamos use a new processing line to process and repackage drums of low-level nuclear waste for disposal offsite at Los Alamos National Laboratory's Technical Area 54. (Courtesy Department of Energy)

By Evan Chandler

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A city councilor who promised to take a stand against increased plutonium pit production at Los Alamos National Laboratory will withdraw her proposed resolution for redrafting.

Following petitions at several recent City Council meetings, last month District 4 Councilor Jamie Cassutt and District 1 Councilor Renee Villarreal introduced [a resolution](#) calling on the federal government to halt preparations for pit production; prioritize cleanup of legacy nuclear waste; and decrease spending for nuclear weapons.

With Villarreal no longer on the council, Cassutt remained as the sole sponsor. But facing pushback from LANL backers and a lack of buy-in from Mayor Alan Webber, she says she will stall the proposal before its first scheduled committee hearing this week.

Instead, Cassutt tells SFR she plans to embark on a new round of meetings. Villarreal, who did not run for re-election, had a greater role in the original language and had more experience with the topic, Cassutt says. In addition, Cassutt says she heard from several constituents who worried the proposed resolution did not adequately acknowledge positive economic impacts of LANL.

"I want to make sure that I have a strong understanding of what those issues are, what the history is...what has been remediated, what hasn't," Cassutt says.

"Obviously, the economic development impact of LANL for our community and for Northern New Mexico is huge. I think what's really important for me is that I am not of the mindset of 'LANL is this awful, terrible, evil organization.' They do a lot of wonderful work. They have a lot of employees that are wonderful members of our community, and so for me just really...having a better picture of it all is important for me before I'm able to carry legislation."

Cassutt says she plans to formally announce the withdrawal at the Jan. 3 Quality of Life Committee meeting.

The City Council has adopted two former resolutions objecting to pit production—one in 2006 and another in 2008. In addition, nine other nonbinding resolutions related to LANL waste, nuclear weapons and other related issues are [on the books](#).

However, Webber tells SFR he would not vote for the resolution as currently drafted.

Cassutt's proposal on the topic, Webber says, lacks key components such as calls for nuclear nonproliferation and nuclear disarmament conversations, as well as discussion of compensation for downwinders.

"I would like to see it get more work. I'd like to have more dialogue and more points added that I think make it a more complete comment," Webber says. "If we're going to offer our insights and opinions and values with regard to nuclear weapons and the impact of LANL and the federal government in our community, we really have to look at it in a comprehensive way."

Webber says he will talk with groups in favor of the resolution and hopes to meet soon with officials at LANL.

"We are in a very dangerous time in the world...so there's a lot of questions about what's going on in the world with our safety and our security, and LANL is an important player in that conversation," he says. "There are something like more than 3,000 people, I believe, [who] live in Santa Fe who work at LANL in some capacity. Not all of it has to do with nuclear weapons, much of it doesn't, and I would not want them to believe that in any way they're not welcomed in Santa Fe or not appreciated in Santa Fe as members of our community. So I think we need to respect that factor."

Los Alamos Study Group Executive Director Greg Mello tells SFR his organization will continue to advocate for the City Council to declare a position against increased weapons production at the lab. He describes the federal government's plans as a way to continue "an arms race" between the United States and Russia and China—one in which the US seeks to increase pit production in order to have the capacity to take on both countries at the same time in nuclear war. [An October 2023 report](#) from the Congressional Commission of the Strategic Posture of the United States outlines the "nuclear force modernization" strategy.

Mello says he's disappointed the Santa Fe City Council won't vote on a resolution soon, adding the facility is currently not in the right condition to produce pits safely, which poses increased risk to the environment and surrounding communities.

"The problem with Los Alamos is that the facility is old. It's small, it has maybe a dozen existing missions that compete for space. The facility is not expected to last forever, and it can't make enough pits to support the US stockpile," Mello says. "Los Alamos has failed at this before, in part because people didn't want it here. And we were able to convince people in Washington that it wasn't a good idea, and we are working on getting the word out about this."

For its part, LANL says regardless of whether Santa Fe passes a resolution, its goals remain the same.

"We value our growing presence in Santa Fe and because more than 3,500 of our employees and their families live in the city and county, they clearly value this community as well," lab spokesman Steven Horak tells SFR via an email statement. "As we have said in the past, the laboratory will not be doing high hazard work outside of Los Alamos. It is our goal to continue to execute our mission requirements as outlined by both the administration and Congress. We will continue to prioritize the safety of our workforce and the public."

Villarreal tells SFR she hopes the council will still adopt a resolution tackling legacy waste from the Manhattan Project era that remains in contaminated soil.

In June 2016, the Department of Energy and the New Mexico Environment Department entered into a consent order to deal with the cleanup of the hazardous waste. The DOE released a timeline later that year that predicted the project's completion by 2040. The Government Office of Accountability [issued a report last year](#) reporting the department's contractor has missed deadlines and failed to take a "comprehensive approach" to the cleanup.

"I think if the governing body is paying attention," Villarreal says, "we would be concerned about what's happening in our neighboring community at LANL."

District 1 Councilor Alma Castro, who now fills the seat Villarreal formerly occupied, tells SFR she plans to work with Cassutt to revise the proposal.



### Evan Chandler

Evan Chandler is an Indianapolis native and a recent college graduate from Ball State University. They joined the SFR staff in July 2023 to cover local government, housing, public safety and the city's Southside. Evan speaks English and Spanish. In their spare time, Evan is an avid fan of RuPaul's Drag Race and a music lover.



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