

New Environment Chief May Lift Cloud of Criticism

By NOLAN HESTER

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If anyone can quiet criticism of Albuquerque Mayor Harry Kinney's commitment to the environment, it is Larry Gordon.

Soft-spoken and self-effacing, Gordon takes over Monday as head of the city's Environmental Health Department amid lingering doubts over how serious the city is about protecting local air quality.

But even the most outspoken critic of the proposed vehicle emissions inspections program, Roy Moody of the American Lung Association, has praise for Gordon. Last month Moody accused the city of undercutting the program, scheduled to begin in January 1983.

"I've never heard anything but the highest regard for him as a health professional," Moody said of Gordon. "You could hardly hire a man of that stature and not say we aren't encouraged."

Gordon has been a key figure in New Mexico public health officials' circles for at least 30 years.

By agreeing to replace the retiring Pat Kneafsey, Gordon is returning to the department he helped create in 1955. At that time, it was one of the first city health departments of its kind in the nation.

For 14 years, he has worked for the state's Health and Environment Department and was its deputy secretary before coming to the city. Last year, he served as president of the American Public Health Association, the nation's largest organization of public health officials.

But Gordon's resume doesn't begin to tell the whole story.

Many of the state's top environmental officials got their first jobs through Larry Gordon. He originally hired Kneafsey, for example, as well as Tom Baca and Russell Rhodes, respectively the past and current directors of the state Environmental Improvement Division.

Both Baca and Rhodes credited Gordon with inspiring them to pursue public health careers. “I think he’s the reason why we’re all in this business,” said Rhodes.

They and others who have worked with Gordon characterized him as an effective administrator who is able to get results while keeping an eye on long-range goals. “He’s very relaxed and seems to maintain a clear thought process through just about any crisis,” Rhodes said.

Baca credited Gordon’s tenaciousness for passage of the state’s Environmental Improvement Act in 1971. The keystone of subsequent environmental regulations, the act spawned the Environmental Improvement Division with its far-reaching powers.

By pushing the law through a reluctant state Legislature, Gordon “has had a tremendous impact” on environmental quality in New Mexico, Baca said.

“He didn’t give up,” Baca said of Gordon. “He survived governors, He survived poor administrators.”

Despite the years with the state, Gordon remains a strong believer in handling environmental problems locally. “I’ve always thought, no matter who I worked for, that it was very appropriate that Albuquerque handle its own program.”

Scheduled to spend most of Monday meeting with his employees, Gordon said it’s too soon to predict what changes, if any, he might make in those programs.

Gordon said he’s aware of the persistent complaints from environmentalists about the emissions program. But he stressed that he has little doubt the mayor is committed to the program.

“I’ve been convinced all these years that he’s supportive of a good program,” Gordon said, noting that Kinney first supported the idea in the 1960s as a county commissioner.

Gordon said his main role will be to coordinate the city’s environmental activities with the aim of creating a unified, comprehensive approach.

“The important thing is not a matter of fiefdoms, or who gets the authority or the glory, but to see that programs work,” he said.