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Genesis Order

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Headline News

Richardson says labs vital to state's future

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Nation

Democrat Bill Richardson visited Los Alamos Wednesday, seeking to add it to the list of counties he expects to win in November's gubernatorial election.

"Now, do you think we can carry Los Alamos?" he asked a group of supporters during a noon meeting.

"How are we doing in Los Alamos?" he asked Monitor Publisher Chris Dissinger during a morning interview.

Richardson also visited radio station KRSN, shook hands with Johnson Control employees, and met with top laboratory officials during the morning's activities.

Los Alamos, he said, is one of three areas he is concerned about, because of its high percentage of Republican voters. The other two are Catron County, a sparsely populated ranching area in the southwest and Chavez County, around Roswell, in the southeast.

With a strong but not decisive lead over Republican Rep. John Sanchez, Richardson was focusing on what he could do for Los Alamos National Laboratory and what the lab could do for New Mexico, if he wins.

A former congressman from the area and former Secretary of Energy, Richardson arrived with a four-point plan for collaborating with LANL on economic development issues for the state.

Pledging to invest money from the state's permanent fund, Richardson said he wanted to revitalize current initiatives for transferring technology and help create more local jobs in the private sector.

State funds would be used to underwrite a for-profit entity, the New Mexico Technology Corporation, to provide capital and management expertise for new enterprises. The object would be to harvest technological advances coming out of Los Alamos and Sandia national laboratories, research universities, military bases, and other scientific institutions and keep the potentially lucrative spin-offs in the state.

"We are sitting on a technological gold mine," Richardson said. "It's time to mine the gold."

Richardson said he would work to increase New Mexico's share of the two national laboratories' procurements and double the



percentage of New Mexico universities' graduates employed by the laboratories.

As a final measure in a new state partnership with the labs, Richardson said he would name a special assistant for Science and Technology and call on the laboratories for experts and advice for improving state government in areas like water management, mining technology, economic development, and the environment.

He said the adversarial climate that currently exists between the lab and the state — including perennial threats to do away with tax exemptions and contentious environmental regulations — could be changed.

"I've seen the culture on both sides, and I think I can bridge it," he said.

Richardson answered questions about some current hot issues.

On the New Mexico Environment Department's efforts to impose a comprehensive administrative order to accelerate environmental cleanup efforts at the laboratory, he said he was sympathetic.

"I had my frustrations, as Secretary, with the New Mexico Environment Department when they refused to give permits to open WIPP [the Waste Isolation Pilot Project, where certain defense-related nuclear wastes are stored in Carlsbad]," he said. "And the refusal was not scientifically based."

Richardson said he would have his own people review the implications of the administrative order, and that he would be looking for fairness and a balance between the environmental and economic impacts.

Asked if he would like to see the Legislative Oversight Committee continue, Richardson said he would like to see it continue on a better level. "End the acrimony," Richardson said, in favor of a view, "that the labs are an economic asset." Although Richardson clearly came to town with a program tailored to the laboratory, one of his supporters said that people in Los Alamos have interests that extend well beyond the campus and the county line.

"I think you're selling Los Alamos short," he said.

"I'm interested in improving a bad relationship," Richardson responded, adding that he did have a much broader platform that included educational reforms, water resource issues, higher paying jobs and tax code reforms.

Another supporter reminded Richardson that he might expect a lot of gratitude from the LANL workforce for having renewed the laboratory's contract with the University of California during his last days as Energy Secretary in January 2001.

"Seven thousand people on the hill can thank you for the fact that they're still in a solid pension plan," he said, to an appreciative round of applause.