

COVER STORY

# High Priority

New Mexico uranium mining projects get federally fast-tracked amid a push for U.S. energy security.

BY LEAH MARCH, PAGES 12-15



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6565 Americas  
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Albuquerque, NM 87110



Ranked: Commercial  
real estate firms,  
coworking spaces  
and office buildings.

**PAGES 16, 18-19**

**RENOVATIONS**

## Art space upgrades with city grant

The Groove features a gallery,  
a classroom and workspaces within  
a 2,300-square-foot bank space.

**COOPER METTS, 4**



# CEO TO CEO

## Cheers to Positive Change

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*Albuquerque Business First* former Publisher Will Martinez sat down with Tania Armenta, president and CEO of Visit Albuquerque, to explore her journey from rural New Mexico to the helm of one of the state's most influential tourism organizations. Armenta shared how her time away—from East Texas to Nebraska—ultimately deepened her love for New

Mexico and drew her back to build a career centered on celebrating its culture, people and unmatched landscapes. With 27 years at Visit Albuquerque, including nearly a decade as CEO, Armenta reflected on the power of tourism, the importance of authentic storytelling and the responsibility of locals to be champions of their own community.

*The conversation has been edited for length and clarity.*

**WILL MARTINEZ:** I think your background is fascinating. Could you tell us about Nebraska and how you ended up in your position in Albuquerque.

**TANIA:** I'm a native New Mexican. I was raised in the Four Corners area. I'm from a small town, Bloomfield. My early years were formed with that rural background. I rodeoed as a young child, so I saw a lot of the state thanks to rodeo. I went away for college. I initially went to a school in East Texas and then ended up at Nebraska to finish my degree to graduate from the University of Nebraska. My husband and I are both from New Mexico. We were high school sweethearts who spent that first year apart, and then I ended up at Nebraska, where he was. I had a couple of early jobs out of school and then pretty quickly, we decided we wanted to come back home to be closer to family. We landed in Albuquerque, which felt like the right place for us to build our careers. I had another job offer I was contemplating, and someone said the Convention and Visitors Bureau was hiring. I had no idea what a Convention and Visitors Bureau was, but I had worked in a high-end hotel throughout college. So, I had that hospitality experience and the appreciation for our state having lived out of state for a while.

**I love that. You can see it too from your team and your work. I appreciate you more than you know. But you are the megaphone for New Mexico in a lot of ways.**



**TANIA ARMENTA**  
President  
& CEO  
Visit Albuquerque

**WILL MARTINEZ**  
Former President  
& Publisher  
Albuquerque  
Business First

I work with a very remarkable team and am proud of their work!

**You really do. It shows. I want to talk about the why behind you and your husband coming back. Why did you stay? What do you love about New Mexico, both professionally and personally and why has that necessarily kept you here?**

I think I needed that time away to better appreciate the state. I love the spirit of this

place. I love the mountains. I've traveled quite a bit. You cannot beat New Mexico's and Albuquerque's sunsets and sunrises. Big wide-open skies. I think the culture of this place is authentic and different. And I appreciate the grit and the tenacity of the people here. There is definitely a spark and an energy here that I just don't find when I travel. It felt like it is the place to be and our families have selected to stay here. We certainly hope that the next generations will choose New Mexico.

**Can you talk a little bit about your family as a whole? I want you to be able to brag about them for a little bit.**

I'm a mother of two children and still getting used to the notion of being an empty nester. We're about 18 months into that.

**That's kind of crazy.**

We are still learning how to be empty nesters. Our daughter just graduated with a bachelor's degree from Nebraska. I think she has additional school in front of her as she was a pre-med major. She's still in Lincoln. She's just an incredible natural-born leader. Whatever she does, I'm confident she will do it well and look to make the world a better place. And my son is a college athlete. He's a quarterback at Louisiana Monroe. He'll be starting his junior year, but second year of eligibility as far as playing football. He is also an incredible leader. He's very driven, he loves and is committed to his craft. When I need to be reminded about

the power of discipline and passion, I just look at my children.

**I just wanted to give you some space for that because I think it's really cool to see native New Mexicans doing cool, big things outside of the state, which is always a great thing. I hope they come back too, but if not, they'll be sons and daughters of New Mexico, which is great. I want to pivot one more time and talk about opportunities and challenges.**

**We can start with opportunities, but I'd love for you to just talk about Tania Armenta. You are this amazing female leader in this state. What is something that you see as an opportunity for Albuquerque, New Mexico to grow in the future?**

From the tourism space I want to start with the authenticity of this place. I feel that so much of America has become homogenized. When we travel at times it's like, what city am I in again? It just feels very similar. I think we oftentimes just forget how amazing this place is.

Our outdoor recreation, our culture, the scenic beauty of this place, the people. When I think about opportunities, I think there's more that we can do to truly celebrate that. To lean into that even further and to stand up for it. Other places would love to have the natural environment and authenticity that we have. It really is the natural component of this place—the geography, the topography, the people,

the culture that make this place so special.

Business owners are doing tremendous and innovative work and that's in addition to the national labs and the things that are happening there as well. I think some of the biggest opportunities come from this notion of more of a positive sum thinking or an abundance mentality, versus the zero sum or scarcity mentality. I feel this real energy of momentum recently in the business community and there's a lot of agreement on where the state and the city need to head. Now I think it's incumbent upon us as business leaders to ensure that happens.

I think it's incredibly well said. I have a friend who may or not be our former editor-in-chief that just moved to Charlotte. She was talking to me, and this is not going to be bad on Charlotte. But she said it doesn't have the heart that Albuquerque has. It feels manufactured. If you go into Charlotte's downtown, it really feels like you could be anywhere in the United States. There is something really special here. And I think to your point, we have to go and be our best cheerleaders. It can't be somebody that comes in and out. It needs to be us that lead the way. I think that's a really good point and something that I need to get better at. Hopefully we all do as a state. There's so much good here and we

can get bogged down by the bad. But how do we celebrate the good? Now I'm going to be a downer and talk about the challenges that you see. We can start tourism wise, but what are the challenges that we can grow to hopefully overcome in time?

I do think we need to remember there are times when we should have certain conversations behind closed doors. I understand those frustrations come from a place of passion and a place of love for the city and the state. But when we air those in certain places, there's no such thing as separation between local and national news.

Those realities and negative social media chatter can be incredibly challenging for our community.

A challenge is really our locals should be our best ambassadors, our best advocates. That doesn't mean we don't want to solve the serious challenges that our community and our state have. I also think we need to be bolder. From a tourism standpoint, I want to give credit to private investment that has happened. You're looking at investment in New Mexico from this pueblo – Sandia Pueblo. You're looking at private investment with some new hotel products and renovation of hotels. But overall new product and development is

not at the pace our neighboring states have invested. From a competition standpoint, we have to get bolder. We have to think about catalytic projects that could leapfrog us to new opportunities from not just a tourism standpoint. I'm a big believer in the power of tourism. It's the notion that it all starts with a visit. It is that first impression of our city and state. People don't move here, don't move a business here, unless they've first been here as a visitor. Whether that's at a meeting and convention or a vacation. That first impression, that opportunity for someone to look and say, I'm really surprised by Albuquerque. I'm surprised by New Mexico. I'm gonna give it another shot. I'm gonna dig deeper.

To your point, one of our vice presidents travels back and forth here from Dallas, and she was really down on us before coming out. Over time, even over the last four or five years, she remarks how the airport's getting better and the mountains are just an anomaly to her. It's fascinating to see that touch point. I have to give a lot of credit to you and your team and Manny at the Sunport. I think it's really special what you've done. I love how visible you guys are in airports. I think it's a fascinating and really cool way that people are getting introduced to New Mexico in a way that feels special. I love that we stand out in Denver, and Phoenix and Austin. It's really special. Kudos

to you and your team on that. We might have answered this question a little bit, just in terms of us being better champions, but when you think about how we as a broad community can better support tourism and visiting New Mexico, what does that look like to you? How could we best be servants to you and making the industry positive moving forward?

I think we've come a long way in the last couple of years. Some of that visibility in terms of being out and about in a much larger way has to do from diversifying our funding, creating the Albuquerque Tourism Marketing District, which the hoteliers championed. The beauty of that is we have this additional awareness and appeal. Now we as a community need to think about what we're out promoting and marketing the city and ask ourselves, are we delivering on that brand promise? What does that visitor experience look like? There's been some really great momentum, but thinking about what that visitor experience looks like, we need to identify where there are gaps. We want to deliver on that brand promise, right? We don't want to be out there saying come to Albuquerque and then somebody comes here, and they don't have a fantastic experience. I think everything we can do to address those visitor gaps in terms of infrastructure and service and just that welcoming component to our community is

.VISIT.

# ALBUQUERQUE

CHANGE YOUR PERSPECTIVE

## ALBUQUERQUE'S DESTINATION MASTER PLAN

3,650 OPPORTUNITIES TO MAKE ALBUQUERQUE THE JEWEL OF THE SOUTHWEST

[VisitABQ.org/Albuquerque-Destination-Master-Plan](http://VisitABQ.org/Albuquerque-Destination-Master-Plan)






Photo by Enoch Holloway

really important.

**I don't want people blowing up your inboxes by any means, but if you had somebody who was a prominent CEO that had one of those suggestions to do things a little bit better, how should they reach out to you?**

Last year we created the Destination Master Plan and unveiled it in November. It outlines a 10-year vision for our destination. We want the plan to be a living, breathing document that makes meaningful change and is impactful. I would say to that leader with the ideas, please e-mail and I will follow-up on it personally or ensure it gets to the right place.

**That's really cool. I loved what you did at Economic Forum last year with the dates. I still have mine in my office. I think it's really special and it was a really cool way to tie the community to being active and an active participant in championing New Mexico.**

The notion of the power of each morning, celebrating the 3,650 mornings over the course of ten-year plan, and we each can do something small each each day to make a meaningful difference. If you think about those compounded, those are significant instead of just talking about what we could do. Let's all individually take responsibility and accountability for doing something.

**I think it's beautifully said. Talent retention. I want to hear your big perspective and also I know you have a ton of insight into hotels and how the visiting community is keeping and retaining talent. But could you kind of talk broadly to how you think we should be trying to keep our top talent in New Mexico and have people like your two wonderful children want to come home? I know it's a big one, but I think you're well suited to answer it.**

I just listened to a panel of leaders encouraging graduating seniors from Albuquerque Academy to consider coming back to New Mexico after college. Many of them, probably 75% of them, are headed out of state to go to college. I was impressed that

the Academy had this panel and were actively engaged in future talent retention. As I listened to that, I was reminded about what we call the community vitality wheel. It starts with the notion of, if you build a place where people want to visit, you build a place where people want to live. If you build a place where people want to live, you build a place where work is going to happen. And if work is happening, you're building a place where people invest.

That circular notion of everything starting with the notion of visit, live, work, invest, and how it all works together.

**It's fascinating.**

I think there's just more as a community, as a city and a state we can do with that in terms of thinking about that it does all start with that visit. I believe in the power of tourism, and I know we have a lot of untapped potential that we should lean into. Think about any community you think is doing well today and is a vibrant and thriving community. I can guarantee they have invested heavily in tourism which has led to other opportunities and initiatives. What followed was people started paying attention to that community in a different way. Maybe all of a sudden, it felt like it was a cool place to be. Oftentimes I think tourism sounds like the fun stuff. But I think really understanding the power of travel, and the power of what this industry, it equates to serious business and revenue. Tourism assets equate to quality of life. We have made huge strides but I think to stay competitive, we're going to have to lean in more heavily. I think an area that's meaningful is the meetings and convention business. I think this discussion around Downtown Albuquerque is critical for our community. I'm pleased to see some progress that is happening there. We're

definitely looking to do our part. We've made some significant enhancements to what that visitor experience looks like in other parts of our community. But I think we have to continue to invest in Downtown Albuquerque because I contend that Downtown Albuquerque is New Mexico's downtown. The Albuquerque Convention Center is the New Mexico Convention Center because of the sheer size and volume and the type of activity that's taking place there. Key thought leaders are coming to our community from associations and groups of all shapes and sizes for all different focus areas. Let's do an amazing job of showcasing New Mexico, so that investment happens for our community. That's what meetings and conventions, that lead initiative, can do for our economy.

**I think a lot of us, including myself, think about tourism as the fun. But it's like bringing the fish in. How do you get them on the line and capture them. To your point that first touch point is going to be so meaningful to them. Downtown is the key. It's the center of the whole state. I hope we can continue to stack wins.**

We have fantastic entertainment districts, neighborhoods throughout the community. But there's an important role Downtown plays.

## THE COMMUNITY VITALITY WHEEL

### 1. VISIT

If you built a place where people want to visit, then you have built a place where people want to live.

### 2. LIVE

And if you built a place where people want to live, then you have built a place where people want to work.

### 3. WORK

And if you built a place where people want to work, then you have built a place where business and residents will invest.

### 4. INVEST

And if you built a place where business and residents will invest, then you have built a place where people will want to visit.



Provided by Visit Albuquerque



One thing you mentioned earlier is we have people in place. Not to bash anybody that was in power or was being a change maker earlier. I think even in the last three to four years we're in the right mindset. Are we going to work through this together or is it going to go back to what it normally is? I think it's an exciting time. I don't want to get too heavy into this as well, but I think your job is fascinating. How does Visit Albuquerque work to promote the city as a hub for tourism? But maybe we could dive in a little bit into you as a CEO and how you are helping to impact that change?

Visit Albuquerque had been a destination marketing organization. Today, we think of it as a destination organization or destination stewardship organization. We've identified as a national trend, if organizations like ours are not paying attention to that, oftentimes that means no one is. If you're marketing and selling your destination, what does that rest of that experience look like? For us it has expanded and it has become more complex.

That's the notion of the Destination Master Plan. Leading that initiative does not mean our organization has the power or the capability to implement everything in the plan. There's some things we can take a lead on. There's other things we need to support and champion and advocate for. I would say it's very data-driven. We've invested heavily in research and market intelligence. Our decisions are making sure we're good stewards of that money and we're making wise decisions in the way we're marketing and selling Albuquerque. It's great to have that insight to know and make sure we're adapting our strategy on what's working. We're looking at the power of our digital marketing. We're doing public relations and travel media relations.

Our social media is one I'd love to see our locals positively engage with, we celebrate Albuquerque. A lot of people don't realize we have a Sports Commission. The goal is we are trying to bring to event organizers, whether they're youth, amateur, professional, to host things here with our sports facilities. We have a new Tourism Grant Program. If you have an idea of how to build the visitor economy, we're looking to enhance and innovate this year with another half million dollars that will be granted in the Tourism Grant Program, bringing it to \$1.5 million over the last three years.

**I think that the scope of what you do is so broad that I think it's good for people to kind of really understand the holistic experience.**

I thought of one group I did not do an adequate job of talking about. The visitor information component of our work when people arrive here. I talked about that first impression. We have a Visitor Information Center downstairs at the Sunport, and we have a Visitor Information Center in historic Old Town. We just added a brand-new welcome center for our convention market in Downtown Albuquerque. We have about 50-60 volunteers who are tremendous community members doing an excellent job of sharing our

community.

**I was at the Sunport the other day they said "Welcome to New Mexico. What brings you here?" And I was like "I parked outside. I love your enthusiasm." I'm sure he does that for everybody because it was really special for me. You don't get that in other places. It kind of shows our authenticity from the get go. Small to medium sized businesses are the core of our economy. When I look at our subscribers and even just the heart of what New Mexico is as a business community, that's really the backbone. What can we do to help you scale and thrive? I think about the Los Poblanos of the world. How do we sing their praise?**

Our tourism community is no doubt built on small and medium sized businesses. Even when you look at our hotel community, the number of local hotel developers we have is really significant. That's both what we would call full-service hotels and select service hotels. The vast majority are locally owned small businesses. When we think about attractions and dining experiences, the small to medium businesses that are providing those experiences is the core of the tourism industry. At a time when we are dealing with some headwinds, it's no better time to support local-- supporting local businesses that are doing great work.

**I take my grandparents out to lunch every Tuesday and I wanted to bring them Downtown a couple weeks ago, and my grandma was like, "We're not going Downtown." And I said "Yes, we are." Even in our own sphere of influence, how do you push?**

**This is the magic wand question, and I asked this to everybody. Once again you can take this anywhere you want, but if you could implement one major initiative for the city for the business community to be a more, cohesive and positive group, what would that be?**

Selfishly, I'm going to mention again the Destination Master Plan. There was 14 months of work that was put in. I have to say, let's lean into that plan. It's not just for the benefit of tourism, it's for the benefit of this community.

**I think we're talking a little inside baseball too. I think I know what the Destination Master Plan is. But could you talk broadly about maybe the scope of what that entails? I know it was a huge effort by many stakeholders, but I'd love for people who don't know about it to hear a little more from you.**

Absolutely, it was a 14-month initiative by the time we were finished. About 2,300 different stakeholders or voices had been pulled into the destination master planning process. That was everything from industry leaders within the tourism industry, to elected leaders, business leaders and residents as well. I think really the Destination Master Plan looks to address and find balance of the visitor audience and the resident audience from an overall community standpoint. It's a rather



Photo by Enoch Holloway

lengthy document, 110 pages in its entirety.

**It's pretty engaging too. It's not like a white paper.**

A combination of consultants helped us with that, JLL and others, helped us with the plan. Really, I think the beauty is that it came from our community and a collaborative effort to figure out that vision for moving this community forward.

**I think this is a perfect segue into one of our final two questions of what does success look like for New Mexico? Tourism specifically, maybe even when we look 5 to 10 years down the road in 2035 when Tania is looking back on stackable wins, what are some of those things that you'd love to see?**

I think we have to continue to look at diversifying our economy. When I think of success, we want to be a place that we say people love to visit here, live here, work here and invest here. All of that is working together. There are a number of people in the business community collaborating together and recognizing the importance of all those roles to create positive momentum and also helping organizations to succeed in a stronger way. I do think there is more coalescing and unifying that the business community can do to make sure this happens.

**Hopefully we all are pushing in that direction. I think it's an important time, but that collaboration is what we need more than ever. I just want to give space for you to brag about your team for the amazing things that you've been able to accomplish in your time. I would love for you to go off on people you appreciate in the community that are doing great work.**

I think there are a couple of things that I would want to say. I work with a remarkable board of directors, and a talented team that is so dedicated to tourism and to this community. They're all there to support one another and to remind each other of just how important the work they're doing is. We have been able to do some great things in the last few years to advance the industry. That's thanks to champions within the industry that have said now is the time to do this. Things like the Albuquerque Tourism Marketing District have been game changing in the way that this community is being shared. To grow that funding was much needed. Today there is private investment, there's public investment. The city was changing, but we didn't have additional resources to tell that story and today, we do. What we do as storytellers on behalf of the destination, we take that seriously and know the responsibility of that. People are thinking about travel as we head into the summer, I'd recommend locals think about traveling in your own backyard this summer as well. Reintroducing yourself to areas of our community. What people will discover is there's new businesses that have cropped up. There are new elements to that neighborhood you didn't realize. I think there is so much there for us to rediscover. I think that will help us as far as advocating and being ambassadors for our community because we are not relying on old experiences and information.

**I just want to thank you wholeheartedly for everything you do. I'm so glad that you're here and fighting for New Mexico and for Albuquerque. We need more people like you. Thank you.**