

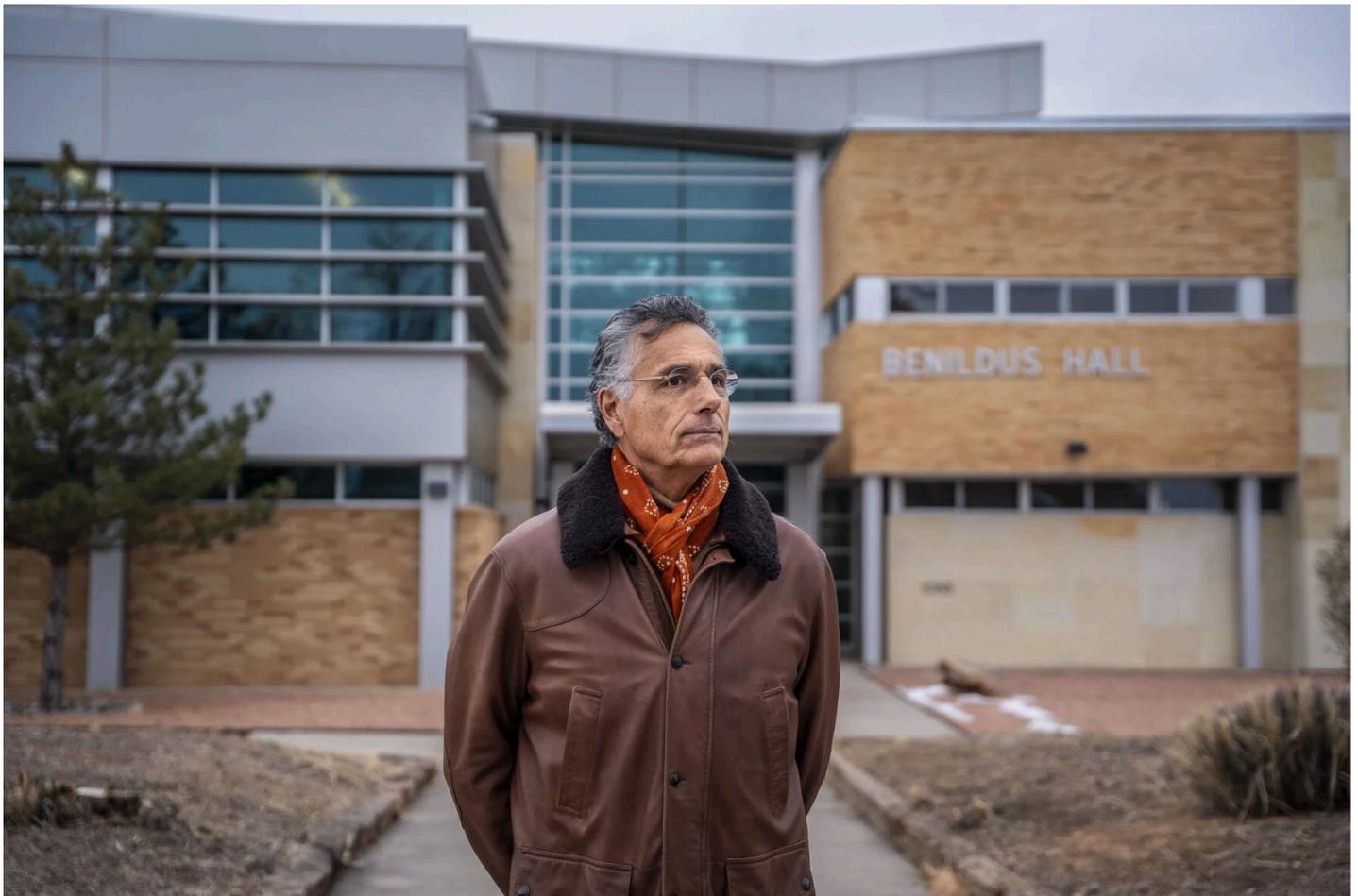
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Boosters have high hopes midtown New Mexico Innovation Hub will make Santa Fe a tech player

★ Follow Mike Easterling

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Feb 10, 2026



David Perez, founder and CEO of the New Mexico Innovation Hub, stands outside Benildus Hall on the midtown campus Jan. 23. The Innovation hub, which has received a grant from the state Economic Development Department, will feature labs, office space and housing for researchers.

Nathan Burton/The New Mexican

Santa Fe is known as a global hub for the tourism industry. But David Perez wants to see it known for more than that.

Through the New Mexico Innovation Hub that Perez has founded on the city's midtown campus, the tech entrepreneur seeks to establish Santa Fe as a center for the innovation economy — Silicon Valley in the Sangre de Cristos, perhaps.

"We want to leverage Santa Fe's natural beauty and unique quality of life to attract innovators from around the world," Perez said.

That task may have become a little easier on Feb. 4 when the New Mexico Innovation Hub learned it's receiving a \$700,000 state grant to help develop the project in Aspect Media Village on the former campus of the College of Santa Fe and Santa Fe University of Art and Design.

The state Economic Development Department's Technology and Innovation Office is the granting agency.

"I'm excited that we have been chosen for this award, which accelerates the growth and impact of the hub," Perez said last week, explaining the money would be used to help build the project's infrastructure to support the innovation economy in the city.

While the build-out will likely take years, it already has attracted such tenants as the New Mexico Consortium, Woodruff Engineering, New Mexico Angels, the New Collar Network and the New Mexico Fusion Igniter. Local experts in the economic development field said the funding is an important step in making Perez's ambitious vision a reality.

"By strengthening the physical infrastructure that supports and connects innovators, scientists, and academics, we're ensuring New Mexico has the capacity to turn ideas into companies and companies into long-term economic drivers," state Economic Development Secretary Rob Black said in a statement.



David Perez, founder of the New Mexico Innovation Hub, stands inside the former Shellabarger Tennis Center on Jan. 23, which is home to companies such as Woodruff Engineering and the New Mexico Fusion Igniter.

Nathan Burton/The New Mexican

Johanna Nelson, director of Santa Fe's Office of Economic Development, said while the presence of tech firms in Santa Fe is nothing new, the concentration of those firms in one space — and their potential to collaborate because of that proximity — has elevated the city's tech industry to another level.

"I am off-the-charts excited," Nelson said.

Carly Venditti, the asset development manager for the Metropolitan Redevelopment Agency, which is overseeing the midtown redevelopment, expressed gratitude to the state for its investment.

"The New Mexico Innovation Hub's presence at midtown will significantly bolster the momentum generated by Aspect Media Village," she said, adding she is looking forward to finalizing an agreement with Perez for additional midtown parcels that will expand the hub's footprint.

Extensive timeline

The innovation hub was launched officially in January in the 32,000-square-foot Benildus Hall in the midtown district.

Perez said the building, which offers office, lab and meeting space, is only part of what he has in the works. Later additions will include a fabrication lab with a 3D printer and a high-speed computing cluster.

He also plans to construct a considerable amount of residential and industrial space on the hub's 5-acre campus while renovating other structures as part of an effort to draw other emerging technology companies to the hub.

Benildus Hall, a former music building constructed in the 1960s, is its centerpiece. Perez said the building is in very good shape, especially after Phillip Gesue, the developer of Aspect Media Village, upgraded its electricity and other infrastructure and installed high-speed internet.

The New Mexico Consortium, a nonprofit research organization formed by the University of New Mexico, New Mexico State University and the New Mexico Institute of Mining and Technology, occupies much of the hall's second-floor. An open area on that floor facing east offers an expansive view of what will be the renovated plaza of the midtown campus as well as the Sangre de Cristo Mountains, making it a natural spot for those working in the building to linger.

One of the more intriguing aspects of the building, Perez said, is its potential as a centralized meeting spot.

"Santa Fe is a strategic location where lab scientists, government officials, academics and entrepreneurs can convene," he said.

Nelson said her office already has taken advantage of the space close to a dozen times in the short period the hub has been open.

"We've been doing many, many community events there," she said.



Thea Vernon, left, New Mexico Consortium office manager, and Carrie Talus, New Mexico Consortium public relations and communications manager, install signs at Benildus Hall on the New Mexico Innovation Center campus on Jan. 23.

Nathan Burton/The New Mexican

More to come

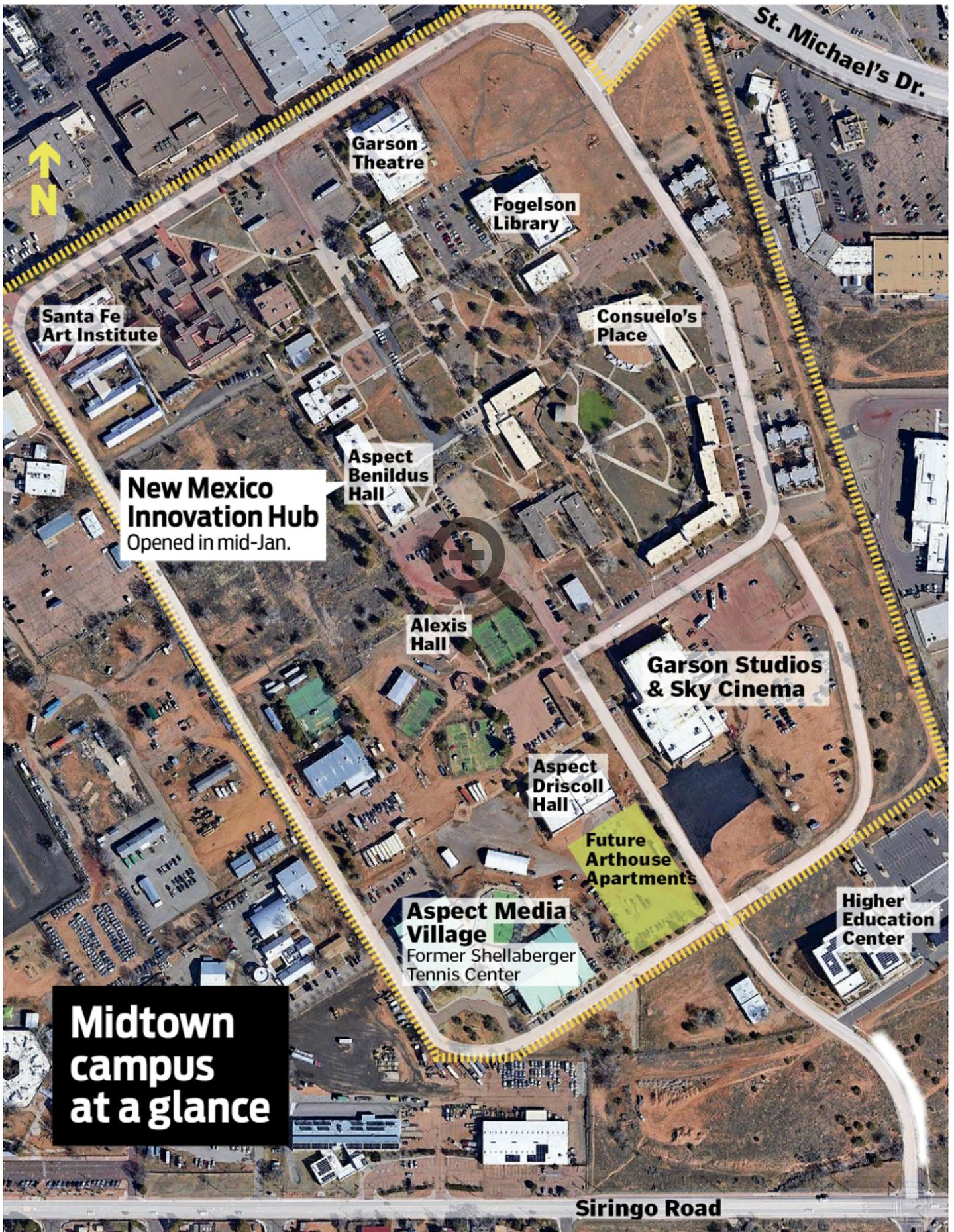
The renovation of Benildus Hall is only the first phase of the innovation hub, Perez said. The planned demolition of Alexis Hall next to Benildus Hall will clear the way for new construction, which will include townhouses and workspace.

“We plan to build a new, exciting, live/work campus to grow the innovation economy in Santa Fe,” Perez said, adding he has studied other innovation hubs around the world as part of his preparation for developing this space.

Woodruff Engineering will be moving into the renovated Shellabarger Tennis Center. The center was being used as a film and TV production facility, most notably as a soundstage for the Amazon Prime series *Outer Range*, but is being converted into industrial space, which Perez said is much in demand.

“These are innovative examples of the reuse of existing buildings,” he said.

One of the Benildus Hall tenants, the New Collar Network, is a member of the Massachusetts Institute of Technology's Fab Lab Network, a global network of field fabrication labs. New Collar Network CEO Sarah Boisvert said the Innovation Hub lab will be one of 2,000 such MIT facilities around the world.



New Mexico Innovation Hub
Opened in mid-Jan.

Midtown campus at a glance

SOURCE: GOOGLE EARTH

THE NEW MEXICAN

"Our emphasis is on helping startups with their prototypes," she said, describing the process of creating those as "an art, not a science."

The lab, which Boisvert expects will be open by March, will feature a 3D printer, laser-cutting equipment and other state-of-the-art equipment.

"And if there's something we can't manufacture in our lab, we can get it designed," Boisvert said. "It's fun. It's very fun."

A big reason for that is the constantly changing nature of the prototypes the lab will manufacture.

"Every job is different, which keeps it interesting," Boisvert said. "They present different problems, different scenarios. And they're designed to be used in different environments, like in outer space or going into a human."

New tax base, new opportunities

On a larger scale, the innovation hub will help diversify Santa Fe's economy, Perez said, giving young people who grow up here a career path that hasn't been available to them previously.

The hub also will solidify and boost the city's finances, he said.

"Crumbling buildings, weeds and prairie dogs don't pay taxes," Perez said. "We want to provide a new tax base for the city and new opportunities for young people."



David Perez, founder and CEO of the New Mexico Innovation Hub, stands inside a common area inside Benildus Hall on Jan. 23.

Nathan Burton/The New Mexican

Perez said he likes the fact that the hub will be only one part of Aspect Media Village, a mixed-use development that will include film production entities, a large apartment complex, a cinema, a restaurant and other enterprises such as the circus arts school Wise Fool New Mexico and Herbs Etc., an herbal medicines manufacturer and wholesaler.

Perez said the innovation hub will bring a unique kind of energy to the midtown campus.

“The hub creates a center of gravity for early stage companies that generates much more activity than folks working alone,” he said. “And because New Mexico is spread out, we have a greater need to build critical mass.”

Perez said he worked 2 1/2 years to put together the innovation hub at the Albuquerque International Sunport before introducing its Santa Fe campus to the public last month. It has been a rewarding experience, he said.

“I’m having the time of my life doing this,” Perez said.

Nelson described Perez as “a doer” and said he and Gesue deserve great credit for creating a sense of momentum on the long-dormant midtown campus.

“This is highly important to our future,” she said.

Boisvert said she was drawn to the New Mexico Innovation Hub by the way Perez pitched the idea. It took her back to her early days in the tech industry when she worked at Kendall Square in Cambridge, Mass., a world-renowned hub of tech companies and MIT facilities.

"I would have lived in my building if they had let me," Boisvert said, chuckling. "That was one of my favorite times in my life. I have really, really fond memories of being around so many startups."

By summer, many of those other entities included in Aspect Media Village should be open and functioning, giving new life to the former college campus that sat abandoned for many years.

"That's when the magic is going to start to accelerate," Perez said.

Takeaways

- The New Mexico Innovation Hub at Aspect Media Village on Santa Fe's midtown campus has received a \$700,000 state grant to help fund its development.
- Founder and CEO David Perez says the money will be used to help build out the project's infrastructure to support the innovation economy in the city.
- The hub has already attracted several tenants, and its boosters hope it will grow into a major tech hub and a big player in the city's economy.

MORE INFORMATION



Herbs Etc. manufacturing facility becomes latest addition to Santa Fe's burgeoning midtown campus

Santa Fe post-production facility moves into Aspect Media Village on midtown campus

Santa Fe midtown development Aspect Media Village shifting, with surge in tech tenants

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