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Council identifies action plan to address Former Bennett Freeze Area, budget formulations, and other major issues

LEUPP, Ariz. – Last week, the Navajo Nation Council held a summit with Navajo Nation Vice President Jonathan Nez, Acting Chief Justice Allen Sloan, and federal officials to address several major issues including the federal budget, rehabilitation of the Former Bennett Freeze Area, public safety, water rights, unemployment, energy issues, revenue projections, and external funding.

On the opening day, Council members met with Vice President Nez and Acting Chief Justice Sloan to discuss several “big picture” items, as referenced by Speaker LoRenzo Bates (Nenahnezad, Newcomb, San Juan, Tiis Tsoh Sikaad, Tse’Daa’Kaan, Upper Fruitland) in his opening remarks at the summit.

“We have many big picture items that may require appropriating dollars or changing of statutes and at the end of the day, it will require the executive, judicial, and legislative branches to work together to move these issues forward,” stated Speaker Bates. “Each priority comes with its own challenges and the ‘One Nation, One Voice’ approach must be a united effort.”

Speaker Bates called for the summit to allow for dialogue between the three branches of government to move forward in addressing the nine priorities outlined in the “One Nation, One Voice” agreement.

Vice President Nez addressed several issues including suicide prevention in relation to the “Developing Communities of Hope” initiative, and also the joint efforts of the executive and legislative branches to bring about tangible improvements to the Former Bennett Freeze Area.

“We recognize that communication between the branches of government can be improved and we are here to work with the Judicial and Legislative branches,” said Nez.

Navajo officials met with Bureau of Indian Affairs Navajo Regional Director Sharon Pinto and other BIA officials and issued recommendations for the use of an anticipated eight-percent increase in federal funding for fiscal year 2018.

Over the course of a two-day discussion with BIA officials, the chairs from each of the Council’s Standing Committees provided recommendations based on their respective oversight authorities.

Council Delegate Edmund Yazzie (Churchrock, Iyanbito, Mariano Lake, Pinedale, Smith Lake, Thoreau), chair of the Law and Order Committee, advocated for public safety including the need for more police officers, additional personnel for programs and departments under the Judicial Branch, housing for police officers, and the need to establish an emergency 911 system.

Acting Chief Justice Sloan also addressed the needs of the Judicial Branch, particularly as it relates to the great need for additional judges on the Nation. Sloan said the Nation currently has only 11 judges that

cover the Nation's 13 judicial districts who are responsible for handling over 50,000 cases per year – an average of over 4,500 cases per judge annually.

Delegate Yazzie and the Chief Justice also emphasized the need to replace or improve judicial facilities that continue to deteriorate and displace judicial employees. Sloan and several Council members also acknowledged the need for the Navajo judiciary system to maintain its independence, free of politics, in order to uphold integrity in serving the public.

“Judiciary has not been appropriated equitable funds,” said Council Delegate Amber Kanazbah Crotty (Beclabito, Cove, Gadi’i’áhi/To’Koi, Red Valley, Tooh Haltsooi, Toadlena/Two Grey Hills, Tsé ałnáo’z’t’í’í). “We need to provide more for them to grow and strengthen their system.”

Chair of the Health, Education, and Human Services Committee Council Delegate Jonathan Hale (Oak Springs, St. Michaels), identified employee housing, scholarships, facilities maintenance, and school construction as top priorities in the area of education.

Delegate Hale said that the lack of teacher housing on the Navajo Nation is a major drawback when schools attempt to bring highly qualified teachers to the Nation. In the area scholarship funding, Delegate Hale said that far too many qualified Navajo students do not receive scholarships due to the lack of funding availability.

“We have many issues at our doorstep and a lot of times our students get lost in the long list of priorities,” said Delegate Hale. “We all need to begin placing them at the top of the list.”

Council Delegate Seth Damon (Bááháálí, Chichiltah, Manuelito, Tsé Lichíí’, Rock Springs, Tsayatoh), who serves as chair of the Budget and Finance Committee, said one of their top priorities is preparing for the Navajo Nation’s FY2017 Comprehensive Budget, including tracking revenue projections and federal funding projections to ensure that the Nation is prepared for any potential shortfalls.

Another top priority for the BFC includes maintaining an open line of communication with the three branches of government to ensure “financial wellness” to build and improve the Nation’s financial portfolio and credit rating to provide additional financing options to help with projects, such as the rehabilitation of the Former Bennett Freeze Area.

Resources and Development Committee chair, Council Delegate Alton Joe Shepherd (Jeddito, Cornfields, Ganado, Kin Dah Lichíí, Steamboat), touched on several areas in need of attention including the Nation’s five-year economic development plan, providing water to more communities for homes and for economic development by securing water rights, and promoting local chapter economic development ventures.

Each of the Standing Committees also provided information regarding legislations approved by each that fall under each of the nine priorities outlined in the “One Nation, One Voice” agreement that was signed in July by the three branch chiefs.

At the conclusion of the summit, it was determined that the three branches will meet on a quarterly basis to address major issues including the Nation’s budget development. Additionally, the three branches agreed to meet with BIA officials on a regular basis as well to further address budget needs and to finalize recommendations for the use of the eight-percent increase in the FY2018 BIA budget.

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