



23RD NAVAJO NATION COUNCIL OFFICE OF THE SPEAKER

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Council members discuss economic development with federal officials

WASHINGTON D.C. – Speaker LoRenzo Bates along with Council Delegates Alton Joe Shepherd, Walter Phelps, Kee Allen Begay, Jr., Davis Filfred, and Leonard Tsosie met with U.S. Bureau of Indian Affairs Deputy Assistant Secretary for Policy and Economic Development A. Bledsoe Downes last Friday, to discuss federal policies that hinder economic growth on the Navajo Nation.

Speaker Bates explained that the Navajo Nation government's three-branches recently reached an agreement that outlines nine priorities for the Navajo Nation, which emphasizes economic development, water rights and projects, and infrastructure development.

"We have young, energetic individuals who want to move our Nation forward economically and we look to the U.S. Department of the Interior to review policies that currently restrict our Nation from moving in that direction," said Speaker Bates, pointing out that the Navajo Nation faces an unemployment rate of nearly 60-percent.

RDC chair Council Delegate Alton Joe Shepherd (Jeddito, Cornfields, Ganado, Kin Dah Lichíí, Steamboat) said that land status issues and double taxation are two major areas of concern that hinder economic development.

"What will it take to move us forward?" asked Delegate Shepherd. "We recognize that there are policies and laws that need to be amended to allow us to do that."

RDC member Council Delegate Leonard Tsosie (Baca/Prewitt, Casamero Lake, Counselor, Littlewater, Ojo Encino, Pueblo Pintado, Torreon, Whitehorse Lake) provided numerous examples of projects on the Navajo Nation that have encountered tremendous challenges such as proposed development near Lake Powell, which draws millions of tourists from around the world each year.

Delegate Tsosie said he would support Congressional initiatives that amend certain land statutes such as the creation of "restricted fee lands," which he says may allow businesses to develop on land held in fee status to develop equity, but remain under Navajo Nation jurisdiction and prevent the businesses from facing dual taxation.

Council Delegate Walter Phelps (Cameron, Coalmine Canyon, Leupp, Tolani Lake, Tsidi To ii) pointed out that four of five of the chapters he represents are located with the Former Bennett Freeze Area and are in great need of relief from federal policies and regulations in order to further develop.

He also said that he has requested the assistance of U.S. Rep. Ann Kirkpatrick to obtain waivers from the federal government that would help streamline certain processes to help development in the Former Bennett Freeze Area.

Assistant Secretary Downes said that entrepreneurial development is a key component to prevent revenue from leaving the Navajo Nation and into border towns.

“We want to support individuals who have new ideas at the local level who can meet local needs so that the [Navajo] government can then focus on broader economic needs,” stated Downes. “I do see opportunities to be better partners.”

Council members said they will provide the Department of the Interior with a follow-up letter outlining the policy changes needed to benefit economic development on the Navajo Nation.

“We want to development partnerships to move us forward in the right direction,” said Speaker Bates, adding that the meeting marked the beginning of Council’s efforts to address the Nation’s economy as a top priority.

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