



23RD NAVAJO NATION COUNCIL OFFICE OF THE SPEAKER

FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE

November 17, 2015

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Delegates discuss federal Indian policy with Columbia University law students



PHOTO: (Front row, left to right) Council Delegate Tuchoney Slim, Jr., Council Delegate Seth Damon, Council Delegate Tom Chee, Speaker LoRenzo Bates, Council Delegate Dwight Witherspoon, and Council Delegate Alton Joe Shepherd with law students from Columbia University on Nov. 16, 2015.

NEW YORK CITY – On Monday, several members of the Navajo Nation Council were honored to accept an invitation to speak with law school students at Columbia University, regarding issues affecting the Navajo Nation and the legal aspects surrounding those issues.

Speaker LoRenzo Bates along with Council Delegates Tuchoney Slim, Jr., Lee Jack, Sr., Alton Joe Shepherd, Dwight Witherspoon, Tom Chee, and Seth Damon were invited by Steven Paul McSloy, lecturer in law, to speak with the class which was comprised of second and third year law school students enrolled in a Native American law course.

McSloy said the course is intended to provide students with an understanding of sovereignty and federal law in relation to Native American tribes, adding that he wanted the students to have the opportunity to interact with the Council members to provide a firsthand perspective.

Council members touched on several major issues including sovereignty immunity, the Former Bennett Freeze Area, education, tribal jurisdiction, and economic development.

Council Delegate Tuchoney Slim, Jr., who represents several communities within the FBFA, described the freeze on development imposed by the federal government as one way in which federal policy has negatively impacted many Navajo families and an issue that the current Council continues to seek to resolve.

“The freeze created tremendous barriers for our people and still today, we have not worked through all of the problems created by the federal government’s policy,” said Delegate Slim.

Council Delegate Tom Chee, a former high school teacher, encouraged the students to visit the Navajo Nation to learn from a different perspective, such as from Navajo elderly people who he explained are educated but not in formal settings such as classrooms.

“Some think that our elderly people are not educated because they didn’t go to school and receive a degree, but they are educated,” stated Delegate Chee. “They understand our language and are very knowledgeable of traditional teachings which are of tremendous value in every aspect of our lives.”

Council Delegate Dwight Witherspoon explained to the students that the land statuses on the Navajo Nation create barriers for individual Navajo people in regards to home ownership and potential equity that deprives the people from accumulating wealth. He explained that the key to wealth for many non-Navajo people is home and property ownership, which is non-existent on the Navajo Nation - another prime example of federal policy preventing economic growth.

The Council members were in the area participating in a historic signing ceremony to finalize an agreement with KeyBanc Capital Markets that allows the Nation to issue bonds in the open market for the first time in history.

Speaker Bates told the students that the concept of issuing bonds to diversify the Nation’s financial portfolio developed after decades of discussion and consideration by past and former leaders, explaining that one of the major issues centered on jurisdictional concerns in cases of arbitration, another key factor that tends to stand in the way of economic progress.

Delegate Shepherd who sponsored legislation to approve the bond financing initiative also touched on jurisdictional issues and explained that it took years and many long discussions to reach the successful outcome.

McSloy is a graduate of Harvard Law School, a bar member of the United States Supreme Court, and former General Counsel for the Oneida Indian Nations Court of New York. He is currently a partner with Carter Ledyard & Milburn in New York City.

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