



23RD NAVAJO NATION COUNCIL OFFICE OF THE SPEAKER

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Council members emphasize the need to take action to develop the Former Bennett Freeze Area



PHOTO: “Forgotten People” president Donald Yellowman addresses Council members and the public at Grey Hill Academy in Tó Nanees Dizi on September 24, 2015.

TÓ NANEES DIZI, Ariz. – Members of the Navajo Nation Council on Thursday, took a major step in fulfilling one its top priorities—to improve living conditions for Navajo people living in the Former Bennett Freeze Area—by meeting with members of the “Forgotten People,” a grassroots organization that continues to advocate for basic needs of FBFA residents.

Over 300 people were in attendance as members of the Council’s Naabik’iyátí’ Committee and Vice President Jonathan Nez met with the group in the community of Tó Nanees Dizi, one of nine chapters within the FBFA and developed a listing of recommendations.

Speaker LoRenzo Bates (Nenahnezad, Newcomb, San Juan, Tiis Tsoh Sikaad, Tse’Daa’Kaan, Upper Fruitland) and Vice President Nez each pointed out that the development of the FBFA was included as a top priority when the Nation’s three-branch chiefs signed the “One Nation, One Voice” agreement in July, which outlined a total of nine priorities for the Nation.

Throughout Thursday's meeting, several delegates emphasized that the time for action is long overdue while acknowledging that many studies, assessments, and meetings have been conducted over the years and that the information needs to be shared amongst all entities to develop solutions and a plan of action.

Prior to issuing recommendations on Thursday, Council members received a report from Donald Yellowman, president of the "Forgotten People" and several members of the group, including JoAnn Armenta who said the "One Nation, One Voice" agreement presented a "window of opportunity" for local residents.

Speaking in the Diné language, 90-year old Joe Ellis said he has advocated for the FBFA for decades, while recalling his days herding sheep through the communities as a youth.

"It seemed the past leaders didn't understand, but I believe that the new leaders today can do the job," said Ellis.

The "Forgotten People" issued five recommendations on Thursday including to develop a high-level advisory committee, develop impacted community-based coalition level task force committee, develop research and analysis committee, develop a fiscal and project oversight committee/task force, and to restructure the Navajo-Hopi Land Commission.

Council Delegate Otto Tso (Tó Nanees Dizi), who represents the Tó Nanees Dizi community, said he will take action by sponsoring legislation to help the FBFA.

"I am tired of waiting, so be expecting it. Let's support our people," Delegate Tso stated.

Council Delegate Alton Joe Shepherd (Jeddito, Cornfields, Ganado, Kin Dah Lichíí, Steamboat), who serves as the chair of the Council's Resources and Development Committee, said many of the infrastructure and housing needs fall under the oversight of the RDC, adding that there is a need for the committee to meet with the affected chapters to discuss the issues further in depth.

"Thank you for coming today, we saw something that we did not see before and this was only the first step," added Delegate Shepherd, who said the committee will set aside time to meet with the impacted chapters.

Council Delegate Leonard Tsosie (Baca/Prewitt, Casamero Lake, Counselor, Littlewater, Ojo Encino, Pueblo Pintado, Torreon, Whitehorse Lake), who also serves on the RDC, recommended developing a housing zone in the southern portion of the FBFA and to begin connecting utility lines for individuals living within one half-mile of existing infrastructure sources.

Near the conclusion of the meeting, Council members voted 15-0 to issue a directive to compile a listing of individuals who were previously compensated for relocating and to have the nine impacted chapters complete right-of-way requests for electrical, waste, and water lines by the end of February 2016.

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