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Navajo-Hopi Land Commission members emphasize Former Bennett Freeze Area housing needs in meeting with federal officials

FORT DEFIANCE, Ariz. – On Friday, members of the Council’s Navajo-Hopi Land Commission met with top officials from the U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development and issued several recommendations to address housing development in the Former Bennett Freeze Area.

In 1966, commissioner of the Bureau of Indian Affairs Robert Bennett ceased development of approximately 1.5 million acres of land that was in dispute by the Navajo Nation and Hopi Tribe, which prohibited Navajo families from making any improvements to their homes or to construct new homes in the area. Decades later Congress passed the Navajo-Hopi Settlement Act and in 2009 President Obama officially lifted the freeze on development in the area.

HUD Principal Deputy Assistant Secretary Lourdes M. Castro Ramirez who serves as the head of the Office of Public & Indian Housing, Deputy Assistant Secretary with the Office of Native American Program Rodger J. Boyd, and the Administrator with the Northern Plains Office of Native American Programs Randy Akers were in attendance.

NHLC chair Council Delegate Walter Phelps (Cameron, Coalmine Canyon, Leupp, Tolani Lake, Tsidi To ii) told the officials that there are concerns over the anticipated closure of the Office of Navajo-Hopi Indian Relocation, as indicated in a December 2014 report issued by the U.S. Office of Inspector General regarding the operations of the office.

The ONHIR is tasked with overseeing the homes of Navajo individuals who were relocated from the homelands to other communities, such as those in the community of Nahata Dziil in the southern portion of the Navajo Nation.

NHLC member Council Delegate Raymond Smith, Jr. (Houck, Klagetoh, Nahata Dziil, Tsé Si áni, Wide Ruins), who represents the Nahata Dziil Chapter, said many of the homes in the community are having major structural problems that ONHIR is responsible for addressing.

Delegate Smith also requested assistance through HUD funding to develop housing for staff and other professionals employed at the Nahata Dziil Healthcare Center that celebrated its grand opening in May.

“We’d like to have HUD help us to facilitate housing in that area because many employees have to travel many miles to and from work,” stated Delegate Smith, who was joined by Nahata Dziil Commission president Darryl Ahasteen who also noted the dilapidated housing conditions.

“They rushed to build these houses and I think some of the requirements were overlooked. We have houses that have walls that have separated and created a four-inch gap and rodents and insects are coming into the houses now,” stated Ahasteen.

Council Delegate Otto Tso (Tó Nanees Dizi) said Navajo people in the Former Bennett Freeze area are struggling to recover from the “economic embargo” imposed on them by the federal government for decades.

“We have the United States government rebuilding Iraq and other cities they destroyed and yet they haven’t fixed the problems caused by 46-years of economic embargo,” said Delegate Tso.

Council Delegate Tuchoney Slim, Jr. (Bodaway/Gap, Coppermine, K’ai’Bii’To, LeChee, Tonalea/Red Lake) said that in addition to housing, there is also a need for emergency services in the communities including fire stations. He added that the current lack of emergency stations would prevent homeowners from securing insurance for their homes once they are constructed.

Near the conclusion of the meeting, Delegate Phelps offered three recommendations to the federal officials, including working with the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers and the USDA to gain their support to utilize their technical expertise in designing and rehabilitating communities.

Secondly, Delegate Phelps requested to utilize HUD’s policy development and research program to begin researching and finding alternative solutions in addressing some of the complex issues brought up by his colleagues.

Lastly, NHLC members requested support for the Nation’s upcoming submittal of an application to the U.S. Department of Agriculture to have one or more regions on the Navajo Nation selected as a Promise Zone(s), including but not limited to the Former Bennett Freeze Area and the Navajo Partitioned Lands.

The Promise Zones initiative was announced by President Barack Obama in January 2013, in an effort to revitalize high-poverty communities across the country. The initiative allows the federal government to partner with and invest in high-poverty urban, rural, and tribal communities to create jobs, increase economic activity, improve educational opportunities, leverage private investment, and reduce violent crime.

The Nation submitted an application last year, but was not selected. Delegate Phelps said he hopes the Nation’s application will be accepted this year to benefit the Nation, particularly the Former Bennett Freeze Area.

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