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Health, Education, and Human Services Committee supports Navajo student housing pilot project at UNM

WINDOW ROCK – On Monday, the Health, Education, and Human Services Committee voted in support of Legislation No. 0475-17, which seeks approval of supplemental funding from the Unreserved, Undesignated Fund Balance in the amount of nearly \$1.5 million, which would provide exclusive dormitory space for Navajo students on the University of New Mexico campus in Albuquerque, N.M.

The legislation states that \$1.5 million would be allocated to the Navajo Nation Office of the President and Vice President, which would execute the contract with UNM. The Navajo student residence hall would reflect cultural and historical values of the Navajo Nation, and would be located in the Lobo Rainforest Building.

HEHSC chair and legislation co-sponsor Council Delegate Jonathan Hale (Oak Springs, St. Michaels) said that one of the main barriers that Navajo students face when attending college is the high cost or lack of housing, interfering with their academic aspirations.

“Rental agreements and other housing contracts can be outrageous, and can lead students to either having to get loans or leaving school altogether because they can’t afford housing. Council Delegate Amber Kanazbah Crotty (Beclabito, Cove, Gadi’i’áhi/To’Koi, Red Valley, Tooh Haltsooi, Toadlena/Two Grey Hills, Tsé ałnáoz’t’l’í), along with OPVP legal counsel Karis Begaye, looked at establishments outside of the Navajo Nation to house students,” said Delegate Hale.

According to the housing agreement with UNM, the Navajo student housing would be a pilot project beginning in Jan. 2018 and ending in July 2021, totaling approximately three years and seven months. The proposed residence hall would house about 118 Navajo students, units would be fully furnished, and include a full kitchen with a dishwasher, washer and dryer.

HEHSC member Council Delegate Nelson S. BeGaye (Lukachukai, Rock Point, Round Rock, Tsaille/Wheatfields, Tsé Ch’izhí) expressed support for the initiative, however, raised concerns regarding the equity of the housing project in terms of including other colleges on the Navajo Nation and off the Nation.

“We need to treat all our Navajo students fairly, wherever their educational ventures are. Could we get an overall analysis for Fort Lewis College, Northern Arizona University, and Arizona State University, instead of just piecemealing this project? I would like to see what other institutions are involved, as well as Diné College and Navajo Technical University,” said Delegate BeGaye.

Delegate BeGaye added that if the funding is not utilized in time, there needs to be a safety net and timeline for the funds to either revert back to the UUFB, or OPVP needs to create an account to keep track of the unutilized funds so that it is only earmarked for the housing agreement with UNM.

OPVP legal counsel Karis Begaye responded to the concerns stating that she is still processing a cost analysis for each of the schools such as possible property acquisitions, land acquisitions, and purchasing apartment complexes near the campuses, and she will include Diné College and NTU. She added that property and land near Fort Lewis College and NAU are extremely high in cost, and the OPVP is researching possible dormitory construction.

HEHSC members voted 3-0 to approve Legislation No. 0475-17, and moves forward to the Budget and Finance Committee. The Navajo Nation Council serves as the final authority on the bill.

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