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Naabik'iyátí' Committee welcomes Congressman Tom O'Halleran to the Navajo Nation

TSE BONITO, N.M. – On Thursday, the Naabik'iyátí' Committee held its regular meeting at the Navajo Nation Division of Transportation and welcomed U.S. Rep. Tom O'Halleran (D – AZ), who provided a report to Council members regarding his initiatives, the formation of his staff, and his willingness to continue meeting and working with tribal leaders to address the priorities of the Navajo Nation.



PHOTO: U.S. Rep. Tom O'Halleran (D – AZ) addresses members of the Naabik'iyátí' Committee at the Navajo Nation Division of Transportation in Tse Bonito, N.M. on Feb. 9, 2017.

Congressman O'Halleran was recently elected to serve his first term representing the 1st District of Arizona, which includes the Navajo Nation. He previously served three consecutive terms in the Arizona House of Representatives and also served 14 years with the Chicago Police Department.

During the two-hour discussion, Naabik'iyátí' Committee members raised a wide range of issues including development in the Former Bennett Freeze Area, water rights, sexual assault prevention, need for more police officers, healthcare facilities, infrastructure development, uranium issues, protection of the Bears Ears National Monument, and others.

Council Delegate Otto Tso (Tó Nanees Dizi) urged the new Congressman to help the Navajo Nation secure federal funding to construct roads, earthen dams, houses, repair windmills, and address other needs in the Former Bennett Freeze Area, while noting that when the freeze was lifted by the Obama Administration there were no federal dollars included to rehabilitate the area.

“The federal government sends billions of dollars in foreign aid to help rebuild other countries and yet they don't help our people in this area,” said Delegate Tso, who represents several chapters in the Former Bennett Freeze Area.

Council Delegates Jonathan Hale (Oak Springs, St. Michaels) and Leonard Tsosie (Baca/Prewitt, Casamero Lake, Counselor, Littlewater, Ojo Encino, Pueblo Pintado, Torreon, Whitehorse Lake) also asked the congressman for his continued support in requesting for exemption from the ongoing federal employee hiring freeze for Indian Health Service and the Bureau of Indian Affairs. The Council members said the hiring freeze has prevented healthcare centers from hiring much-needed healthcare workers in several areas on the Navajo Nation, including the Crownpoint Healthcare Center.

Delegate Tsosie also told Congressman O'Halleran that securing water rights through Congressional action remains a top priority for the Navajo Nation and asked the congressman to support the Navajo Nation in their ongoing efforts to negotiate a fair and beneficial settlement in the states of Utah and Arizona.

Regarding the high rate of sexual assaults on the Navajo Nation, Council Delegate Amber Kanazbah Crotty (Beclabito, Cove, Gadi'í'áhi/To'Koi, Red Valley, Tooh Haltsooi, Toadlena/Two Grey Hills, Tsé ałnáoz't'í'í) who serves as the chair of the Sexual Assault Prevention Subcommittee, asked the Congressman to designate a staff member to work closely with Navajo leaders to create solutions that help to deter sexual assaults and help victims.

Delegate Crotty and Council Delegate Raymond Smith, Jr. (Houck, Klagetoh, Nahata Dziil, Tsé Si áni, Wide Ruins) also drew attention to the need to continue addressing the impacts of decades of uranium mining, which continues to cause health problems for many Navajo people and communities.

The community of Nahata Dziil, which Delegate Smith represents, has dealt with uranium contamination to their water source in recent years, which has affected a nearby school that has a high number of Navajo students. He said the problem has yet to be resolved and noted that the school continues to incur high costs associated with providing student with alternative water sources including bottled water for consumption.

Congressman O'Halleran thanked the Council members for sharing their views and priorities and informed the committee that he recently appointed former Arizona Senator Jack Jackson, Jr., who also served most recently under the Obama Administration, to serve on his staff to oversee all tribal issues within the Congressman's district.

He also acknowledged that his staff would go through an educational process to learn more about issues that impacting tribes including the Navajo Nation. Additionally, he conveyed his willingness to continue meeting with Navajo leaders to review policies and laws that may need to be amended to benefit tribes with their wide range of issues.

Naabik'iyátí' Committee members thanked the Congressman for visiting the Navajo Nation and devoting time to discussing the issues with Council members. Committee members voted 15-0 to accept the report.

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