



23RD NAVAJO NATION COUNCIL OFFICE OF THE SPEAKER

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Navajo Nation Council approves extension of timeline for the Begaye-Nez Administration to construct homes for veterans

WINDOW ROCK – During a special session held on Thursday, the Navajo Nation Council approved Legislation No. 0258-17, which would extend the timeline for the availability of funding from the Veterans Trust Fund for the Navajo Nation’s Veterans Administration to construct more homes for veterans, until the end of fiscal year 2020. Without the approval of the legislation, the remaining \$10.6 million in veterans housing funds would not be available for use beyond the end of September 2017.

Legislation sponsor Council Delegate Steven Begay (Coyote Canyon, Mexican Springs, Naschitti, Tohatchi, Bahastl’a’a’) said that approving the legislation would provide the Navajo Nation Veterans Administration, which is under the Office of the President and Vice President, additional time to construct and renovate homes for Navajo veterans.

In Sept. 2013, the Council passed resolution CS-48-13 sponsored by Council Delegate Alton Joe Shepherd (Jeddito, Cornfields, Ganado, Kin Dah Lichíí, Steamboat), which provided a portion of the annual set-aside from the Veterans Trust Fund to construct up to 15 homes and provide repairs and renovations for Navajo veterans in each of the five agencies for a period of four years.

Prior to consideration by the Council, the legislation went before the Naabik’íyáti’ Committee on Thursday, which approved the bill along with three amendments.

The legislation initially requested an extension of one year to finish constructing and renovating homes for veterans, however, Council Delegate Edmund Yazzie (Churchrock, Iyanbito, Mariano Lake, Pinedale, Smith Lake, Thoreau) proposed an amendment to allow an additional three years, or until the end of September 2020. Naabik’íyáti’ Committee members approved the amendment by a vote of 14-0.

Committee members also pointed out concerns over an audit report conducted by the Office of the Auditor General that showed several critical deficiencies within the Veterans Housing Program. Since the report was issued, a moratorium was placed on the construction of homes until the audit findings are resolved.

The report indicated that the Veterans Administration was unable to show exactly how \$1.9 million of a lump sum payment to Home Depot for materials was spent. The report also stated

that homes were constructed for individuals that were not eligible to receive a new home under the program, and that some homes that were built were poorly constructed.

In response to the audit findings, the Health, Education, and Human Services Committee and the Budget and Finance Committee recently approved a corrective action plan that requires the Veterans Administration to address the audit findings within one year.

On Thursday, Council Delegate Dwight Witherspoon (Black Mesa, Forest Lake, Hardrock, Pinon, Whippoorwill) proposed a second amendment to the legislation to include language requiring the Veterans Administration to have a housing action plan, an amended plan of operation, and amended policies and procedures for the use of funds to be completed and approved by the Health, Education, and Human Services Committee, prior to any additional distribution or expenditure of funds for the Veterans Housing Program. Committee members approved the amendment with a vote of 13-0.

A third amendment introduced by Council Delegate Raymond Smith, Jr. (Houck, Klagetoh, Nahata Dziil, Tsé Si áni, Wide Ruins), sought to include a resolution from the Fort Defiance Agency Veterans Organization that advocates for accountability and transparency within the Veterans Administration and the Veterans Housing Program, and supporting the Fort Defiance Agency Veterans Housing Board. The amendment was approved with a vote of 14-0.

Veterans Administration acting director Hubert Smith, who has served in the position since January 2017, said the administration is currently working to address the audit findings in order to restart the process of constructing more homes. He noted that although resolution CS-48-13 was passed in 2013, the bidding process, procurement procedures, and the hiring of workers to construct the homes delayed the start of construction until May of 2014.

Smith told the committee that a total of 197 homes have been constructed to date. He added that 39 individuals are currently awaiting new homes, and that an additional 325 individuals have submitted applications for new homes through the Veterans Housing Program.

When the legislation went before the Council during its special session on Thursday, Council members approved the bill by a vote of 14-0. The Council serves as the final authority for the bill.

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