Navajo Nation Council receives Chapter Distribution Expenditure Plan update from Division of Community Development

FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE: November 4, 2020

WINDOW ROCK, Ariz. — Members of the 24th Navajo Nation Council received an update from the Navajo Nation Division of Community Development (DCD) and the Administrative Service Center (ASC) program on the implementation of the Navajo Nation CARES Fund Chapter Distribution Expenditure Plan approved through Resolution No. CS-73-20, which allocated coronavirus response funding to each Navajo Nation chapter under the 50-50 chapter funding formula. The report came from DCD Executive Director Dr. Pearl Yellowman and ASC Department Manager Sonlatsa Jim-Martin during the Nov. 2 special session of the Navajo Nation Council.

Yellowman began with clarification on the needs assessment and the form provided by the DCD for chapters for the distribution plan under the ASC’s implementation process. “The needs assessment intake form served as a cover sheet for submission. There were no resolutions required,” said Yellowman.

Yellowman added the online portal for chapter administrators to utilize in submitting their information went live on Oct. 26, which was approximately 10 working days following the legislation’s enactment. She noted initial concern about the infrastructure projects listed in the legislation, such as window installs and plumbing. In response, the DCD’s Community Housing and Infrastructure Department was mobilized to provide further assistance for some of the projects proposed by chapters.

From Oct. 19-23, chapter training was conducted by DCD and ASC staff in collaboration with the Office of the Controller. However, from Oct. 25-29, the division’s resources were devoted to distributing hardship assistance program applications, which were complicated by inclement weather.

Due to feedback from chapters, the online portal deadline was extended from Oct. 30 to Nov. 6. Yellowman reported that chapters have submitted and updated their information through the online portal successfully, and the remaining time has been given for remaining chapters.

“It’s been really tough on the chapters with the portal, the hardship, the election. It’s been back to back to back,” said Yellowman.

Jim-Martin voiced support for the Navajo Nation Office of the Controller’s coordination, saying, “We’re very appreciative for Madam Controller’s expertise in the CARES Act.”

Jim-Martin said each chapter has a chapter support representative with the Office of the Controller to assist them in inputting their information in a compliant manner. She added that, during a training held with all 110 chapters, 10 categories of expenditures were shared with chapters to provide guidance on what is eligible and ineligible for CARES Funds.

“I think there should be consistency,” said Council Delegate Raymond Smith, Jr., in reference to the feedback he has received from chapter leaders. Chapters have reported changing information from DCD and OOC regarding vehicle purchases, wood stoves and other equipment.

Yellowman said staff have been responding to questions from chapters, but technical assistance has been limited by the final determination of the Controller’s Office as to which purchases are eligible. That determination is comprised of a financial analysis that weighs the options between renting or buying certain items, like heavy equipment, between now and the Dec. 30 deadline.
“There’s no communication,” said Council Delegate Jimmy Yellowhair. He relayed statements from chapter officials that calls to the Office of the Controller staff have resulted in unanswered questions regarding the documentation for chapter distribution funds.

“Today, I had a family member go to NAPI to buy some hay. And later on, I got a call back saying, ‘For some reason, they doubled their prices,’” added Council Delegate Jamie Henio. Price gouging is a growing concern as CARES Funding is making its way from the Navajo Nation to surrounding areas.

“Dr. Yellowman, in one of the spreadsheets that you previously presented, there’s a category where individuals are listed for bathroom additions related to CARES Act funding,” said Council Delegate Daniel E. Tso. “However, chapters are being told they can’t fund bathroom additions or weatherization if it’s going to individuals.”

Yellowman said the division has been successful in implementing projects under Resolution No. CJN-47-20, including the bathroom additions, due to the early input of the Department of Justice on the emergency procurement process. The other legislation, including Resolution Nos. CJY-67-20 and CS-73-20, have deadlines of December 30, which the division is working with external partners on an every-other-day basis to track progress.

In response, Yellowman said on the first chapter training call, more than 200 chapter staff were in attendance. Communication has been a strongly emphasized by the division, which includes establishing opportunities for one-on-one consultation and seeking proactive input from the Department of Justice and the Controller’s Office.

“We are the facilitators, we connect the chapters with the Controller’s Office,” said Yellowman.

She continued with noting that chapters have expressed concern their relationships with vendors may be negatively impacted by delays in the procurement process. She also noted that the division is seeing contractors returning bids and proposals for work that are generally higher in cost, which Yellowman said may also be happening on a national level.

The division, in collaboration with the Motor Vehicle Review Board (MVRB), has also prepared for the final determination of the Office of the Controller regarding the eligibility of new vehicle purchases using CARES Funds. That board is charged with overseeing Navajo Nation vehicle assignments under the Navajo Nation Code.

Council Delegate Wilson Stewart, Jr., said, “I do appreciate the insight that you and your staff provide, as well as the training that is provided to chapters. That part of the communication is good.”

Stewart noted his chapters are getting anxious because the deadline to expend CARES Funds is approaching quickly. Henio also expressed his appreciation to the division staff and to Yellowman for putting forth the effort to coordinate chapter distribution within the time given.

Yellowman responded to the Council’s concerns over specific allowances and communications with chapter officials by leading a walkthrough of the presentation provided to chapters during the Oct. 30 expenditure training. The presentation contained lists of eligible and ineligible expenditures across 10 categories with specific examples included within each category.

Discussion continued late Monday night with further concerns from Council delegates over delays in chapter expenditures and concerns in the DCD’s capacity to implement the expenditure plan. The DCD’s report was ultimately accepted with a vote of 19 in favor and 1 opposed.

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**MEDIA CONTACTS:** communications@navajo-nsn.gov, (928) 287-2085
Byron C. Shorty, INT Communications Director
Timothy E. Benally, Public Information Officer