WINDOW ROCK, Ariz. — Members of the 24th Navajo Nation Council met with White House policy advisors and federal officials Tuesday to discuss ongoing policy challenges and recommendations ahead of the Nov. 3 General Election. Navajo Nation Vice President Myron Lizer and Second Lady Dottie Lizer also took part in the discussions on Oct. 27, which included a series of morning breakout sessions covering priority policy areas with federal officials.

“The Navajo Nation held a productive discussion with our federal delegation, touching on specific economic development barriers, veterans and healthcare issues, our federal CARES Act needs, the extensive infrastructure needs across the Navajo Nation and building safer communities in addressing our missing and murdered Diné relatives and indigenous people. In this next administration, the Navajo Nation wants to secure these priorities as pillars of our federal policy initiatives, in addition to the growing areas of local needs specific to the Navajo People. We are deeply appreciative of the opportunity to speak closely with our federal leaders and administrators, and we will continue to impress upon our policy leaders the same priorities we shared today,” said 24th Navajo Nation Council Speaker Seth Damon.
Doug Hoelscher, assistant to the President and director of White House Intergovernmental Affairs, and Jennie Lichter, deputy assistant to the President and deputy director of the Domestic Policy Council, took part in discussions with Navajo leaders. “I was struck often by how many of the policy priorities you have, that you put forth in the conversations, are really shared priorities,” acknowledged Hoelscher.

“I’m really grateful for your feedback, your frank and honest input on the issues on which we can continue to partner with you and partner with you more effectively to solve problems that are facing the people on the Navajo Nation,” said Lichter.

Speaking to building safer communities on the Navajo Nation, Office of Justice Programs Principal Deputy Assistant Attorney General Katharine Sullivan said the presidential executive order establishing the Operation Lady Justice task force has been a critical component in the ongoing effort to address the crisis of missing and murdered American Indians and Alaska Natives. The Administration’s focus on promoting safer communities in Indian country has brought multiple federal agencies together to conduct tribal consultation, Sullivan explained.

Department of Health and Human Services Deputy Secretary Eric Hargan added the violence directed towards Native Americans is not just a public safety and law enforcement issue, but also a public health concern for victims and their families. To further promote tribal consultation, a new federal framework for working with tribal communities was announced that includes agency consideration of culture, language and traditional practices, economic mobility, prevention and social determinants of health.

Jeanine Hovland, commissioner with the Administration for Native Americans, offered recognition to Navajo leaders for advocacy efforts that led to the development of the framework. “I commend the Missing and Murdered Diné Relatives organization that’s already having these communications. We heard from Delegate Crotty today and many of what she’s talking about is what is in this framework,” said Hovland.

Tara Katuk Mac Lean Sweeney, assistant secretary of Indian Affairs, reiterated the importance of having federal leadership on the Operation Lady Justice Task Force, stating, “This is a great start, but our work is not done.

Council delegates also discussed the federal CARES Act Coronavirus Relief Funds received by the Navajo Nation. Council Delegate Pernell Halona told the federal officials, “We’re under the gun now trying to get this funding spent so we don’t have to send it back to the federal government. The ideal thing would be to extend the deadline.”

Council Delegate Jamie Henio, chairman of the Budget and Finance Committee of the Navajo Nation Council explained how the Navajo Nation has managed the CARES Funds. “As Council, we allocated all the CARES money that we received and then it was signed into law by President Nez,” said Henio. The Council’s oversight of CARES Act funded programs will help ensure the reallocation of funds, internally, before the Dec. 30 deadline.

Council Delegate Rickie Nez supported a request for Treasury Secretary Steven Mnuchin to issue an updated definition of ‘cost incurred’ in federal Coronavirus Relief Fund regulations for a Dec. 2021 deadline in completing coronavirus response projects. That request came from by Sen. Steve Daines and Sen. Martha McSally, “It’s a start, the winter season is here. We need to continue mitigating. We, as a tribal government, debated how that money is going to be spent. We need that extension,” stated Nez.

Beyond immediate CARES Act needs, Navajo leaders called for federal infrastructure funding and increased support for comprehensive economic development initiatives, including broadband development.

Indian Affairs Deputy Assistant Secretary for Policy and Economic Development Mark Cruz shared that, through coordination with Navajo leaders, Wi-Fi service was installed on the Navajo Nation’s 25
longest bus routes for Navajo students in response to the pandemic. Hargan added rural broadband access is a critical area for the Administration, which helps in expanding access to telehealth services.

Broadband access on the Navajo Nation should include designating tribal colleges as eligible for funding through the federal E-Rate program, stated Council Delegate Nathaniel Brown. When they have access, students and remote workers are more productive in spite of the pandemic restrictions, Brown indicated.

“Allow tribal colleges to be a part of the E-Rate program. A stroke of a pen will make that happen,” said Diné College President Charles Roessel.

Both Roessel and Navajo Technical University President Dr. Elmer Guy offered additional input towards improving tribal colleges’ access to restrictive federal resources.

Dr. Guy added, “We serve about 1,800 students and United Tribes [Technical College] serves about 700 students. But the funding they get of Title 5, they get 66 percent, and we get 33 percent.” Funding distribution formulas can be fixed easily under administrative action, explained Dr. Guy.

Infrastructure project support, like state funding for much-needed road improvements on the Navajo Nation, has been complicated by party politics, shared Council Delegate Jimmy Yellowhair. Yellowhair pointed to the recent Kayenta Coal Mine closure and the ongoing issues created by the federal government’s handling of the Navajo-Hopi Land Dispute in requesting greater federal funding. “I think there’s a very good reason why you are here. You are here to understand the problems, and when you get back to Washington, D.C., help us,” said Yellowhair.

Federal support for tribal sovereignty and self-governance is part of the Administration’s approach to funding issues. Hoeschler drew on the importance of the newly established Tribal Transportation Self-Governance Program within the US Department of Transportation in allowing tribal nations greater decision-making authority over federal transportation funding. That program was developed through consultation with tribal nations, including the Navajo Nation.

“The overarching element is protecting—and the protection of—our tribal sovereignty,” said Vice President Myron Lizer.

Responding to Council delegates on unanswered requests for improving access to veterans’ benefits and establishing a VA health care facility on the Navajo Nation, Department of Veterans Affairs Under Secretary for Benefits Paul R. Lawrence, Ph.D., provided the first acknowledgement from federal officials of the requests. “I commit to you—because I run the benefits programs—we will figure out how to get your veterans benefits,” stated Lawrence. He added that coordination and transparency will be carried out with the Veterans Health Administration to determine feasible improvements to direct services.

Improving overall health was addressed by Indian Health Service (IHS) Director RADM Michael D. Weahkee, who explained that transportation, broadband and water infrastructure is part of the Administration’s plan for addressing access to care, improving quality of care and improving operations throughout the federal health system.

“If you don’t have clean water, you can’t wash your hands. You can’t protect yourself from Covid. If you don’t have good roadways, you can’t get to your hospital or your clinic. If you don’t have healthy food available to you, that’s going to impact your overall health, as well,” stated Weahkee.

Roselyn Tso, director of the Navajo Area Office of the IHS, added, “In the year 2020, it breaks my heart when we cannot bring water to our people. We have to do a better job at that. That has to be done collectively because water impacts everything that we do on the Navajo reservation.”

Acknowledging the recent completion of the Cutter Lateral Water Treatment Plant in Dził Náoodiłii, Council Delegate Mark Freeland expressed appreciation to the late Sen. Pete Domenici and former Sen.
Jeff Bingaman for reaching across the aisle to promote the Navajo-Gallup Water Supply Project at the federal level. But, resolving ongoing issues with the complex land statuses that make up the Navajo Nation’s eastern region requires the participation of the US Bureau of Land Management, which was missing from the federal delegation, Freeland pointed out. Issues with federal ownership of eastern lands has often resulted in Navajo residential utility poles requiring at least three years to be cleared and constructed.

Sweeney said the US Department of the Interior is identifying gaps in last mile and middle mile deployment of broadband and transmission infrastructure on federal lands, including those found in the eastern ‘checkerboard’ region. Sweeney expressed the Administration’s interest in working with the Navajo Nation to identify problem areas.

Relating to federal policies affecting Navajo lands, Council Delegate Otto Tso asked for a modernization of the Code of Federal Regulations to allow the Navajo Nation a better chance at economic prosperity. “What’s wrong with the policy from Washington that governs Indian country? How can we allow tribes to move forth?” Tso described the 1.6 million acres of the western Navajo Nation knowns as the Former Bennett Freeze Area. That area was subjected to a 42-year federal restriction against any form of development by Navajos residing in that area. The federal government has not properly addressed rehabilitation and is pursuing the closure of the Office of Navajo and Hopi Indian Relocation (ONHIR).

“We have our trustees in this very chamber, looking at the needs of the Navajo Nation. Whether it’s a need to address a child that’s been born just this morning, to the need of that elder that’s passing on to the spirit world at the end of today,” said Tso. To fulfill the mission of the office, Tso conveyed the Navajo Nation’s request that an Indian commissioner be installed to govern ONHIR.

The discussion concluded with statements from Lichter acknowledging the commitment by Lawrence to personally look into veterans benefits and the request by Council delegates for a clinic located on the Navajo Nation. Lichter also pointed to the ongoing work of the Operation Lady Justice Task Force as an opportunity to continue the government-to-government consultation between the Navajo Nation and federal agencies.

Sullivan stated she will report to Attorney General William Barr on the information shared by Chief of Police Philip Francisco that a 911 emergency system is currently unavailable on the Navajo Nation. She also indicated the agency’s grants can be examined for ways to improve the Navajo Nation’s access to meaningful awards.

The round table discussion concluded Tuesday afternoon with a presentation by the federal delegation of a Presidential Award for Combating Human Trafficking on the Navajo Nation. A tour of the Division of Public Safety detention facility and the Navajo Nation Museum was conducted for the Washington delegation.

Other federal participants included CAPT Brian K. Johnson, deputy director of the NAIHS, and Bartholomew Stevens, regional director of the Navajo Regional Office of the Bureau of Indian Affairs.

Federal leaders were also present Wednesday morning at the grand opening and dedication of the Little Singer Elementary School in Birdsprings, Arizona.

An archived video livestream of the discussion between Navajo leaders and federal officials may be accessed online through the Navajo Nation Council’s Vimeo, Youtube and Facebook pages.

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