



Navajo Nation Council Approves application to Department of Interior for Chaco Canyon cultural resources investigation

FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE: September 14, 2020

WINDOW ROCK, Ariz. —During a special session of the 24th Navajo Nation Council Sept. 4, emergency Legislation No. 218-20 was unanimously approved the submission of the Navajo Nation Heritage and Historic Preservation Department’s (HHPD) research proposal titled “Chaco Canyon Cultural Resources Investigations” to the United States Department of the Interior (USDOI).

The legislation was introduced by Council Delegate Mark Freeland (Becenti, Lake Valley, Nahodishgish, Standing Rock, Whiterock, Huerfano, Nageezi, Crownpoint), who shared that the \$1 million being offered by the USDOI for the research proposal has a deadline of Sept. 8.

HHPD Director and Tribal Historic Preservation Officer Richard Begay informed the Council that Navajo Nation President Jonathan Nez received a letter invitation Jul. 27 by the USDOI to submit a proposal to conduct research in Chaco Canyon.

The letter stated that the Secretary of the Interior set aside a \$1 million grant to do the cultural resources work. Begay said 23 other tribes in New Mexico have already submitted proposals under the grant.

“One of the reasons we’re looking for Council support is that \$1 million is for all 23 tribes and we object to only having one contract for all 23 tribes,” said Begay. “We believe that because the Navajo People have ceremonial and clan origin histories that come from Chaco Canyon.”

The Navajo Nation’s proposal outlines a research budget of \$434,356.07, which includes funds for tribal cultural experts and consultants, resources to conduct a comprehensive review of available cultural resource materials and further support for implementing non-invasive guidelines for the study to follow. Cultural consultation will be particularly important when handling Navajo traditional sites identified across the Chaco Canyon area, which include ceremonial artifacts and burials.

Begay also outlined the HHPD’s research plan, consists of a comprehensive literature review, incorporation of clan and ceremonial origins, and migration patterns across the landscape.

Following a review of existing literature, the plan calls for further field work and interviews with people living in the area as well as Navajo residents from across the Navajo Nation. With the appropriate knowledge and research, a comprehensive report will be created and informational materials distributed back to the Navajo people.

Council Delegate Carl Roessel Slater (Round Rock, Tséché’izhí, Rock Point, Tsaile/Wheatfields, Lukachugai), co-sponsor, also clarified that the study must also give special emphasis to areas of high oil and gas development potential within the Mancos-Gallup Resource Management Plan, as required by the investigations report authorizing this study.

Delegate Slater also emphasized preservation of Navajo culture and sovereignty in the Chaco Canyon area.

Delegate Slater pointed to Chaco Canyon as an important part of Diné (Navajo) history. “The Navajo Nation has a deep and extensive connection and history and legacy that can become a dispute is when we let other people write our stories and history,” said Delegate Slater

Council Delegate Daniel E. Tso (Baca/Prewitt, Casamero Lake, Counselor, Littlewater, Ojo Encino, Pueblo Pintado, Torreon, Whitehorse Lake) sought clarification on the funding amount and the opposition to the single grant with the Department of the Interior for all tribal nations in the area.

Begay reaffirmed that part of the legislation is intended to give the Navajo Nation an opportunity to recount historical and cultural ties to Chaco Canyon without being misrepresented by non-Navajo researchers, including researchers from other tribal nations.

HHPD stated the proposal's purpose is to maintain culture and traditions for Navajo children and grandchildren. In the process, HHPD also intends to correct more than 100 years of misinformation by anthropologists and archaeologists through its involvement of the Navajo public and youth.

As a result, Council Delegate Raymond Smith, Jr. (Klagetoh, Wide Ruins, Houck, Lupton, Nahata Dziil), requested to change the legislation language to clarify that the Navajo Nation strongly objects to this approach of combining the ethnographic study of Navajo and Pueblo people. The amendment was approved.

"Although most of us live in the west, we pray to the east and our stories are history and our connection are out there too," said Delegate Slater. "I strongly support this."

The Navajo Nation Council approved the legislation with a vote of 20 in favor and 0 opposed. The resolution was finalized with the certification by the Speaker of the Navajo Nation Council.

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