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Budget and Finance Committee seeks to provide additional funding to the St. Michaels Association for Special Education

WINDOW ROCK – Last week, the Budget and Finance Committee considered Legislation No. 0424-17, which seeks to allocate a grant from the Navajo Nation in the amount of approximately \$2.7 million from the Unreserved, Undesignated Fund Balance to the St. Michaels Association for Special Education for a road infrastructure improvement project.

According to the legislation, the funding request for the grant would aid the SMASE program, a non-profit organization, with repairs to the road servicing the school and nearby communities. Attached to the legislation were several comments from SMASE staff and parents who stated the roads have become “deplorable” and “dangerous” for transporting special education students.

Legislation sponsor Council Delegate Jonathan Hale (Oak Springs, St. Michaels) said the roads become nearly impassable when inclement weather affects the area, in which at times, only vehicles with four-wheel-drive are able to reach the school.

BFC vice chair Council Delegate Dwight Witherspoon (Black Mesa, Forest Lake, Hardrock, Pinõn, Whippoorwill) raised concerns regarding the funding source for the project and suggested that the SMASE program approach the St. Michaels Chapter for funding to aid with the road improvement project.

“A proposal through the UUFB would be a much bigger fight. How much is the school going to put into this? Are you asking Apache County, Navajo Nation Division of Transportation, the chapter, and state senators for assistance? This proposal is just coming to the Council saying, ‘fund the whole thing,’ and it becomes our responsibility,” said Delegate Witherspoon.

According to the SMASE presenters, they informed the committee that they have reached out to the chapter and NNDOT, in which they were denied assistance. However, Apache County was able to complete minor road improvements, but funds have never been fully dedicated to fix the entire road and parking lot because they are a private non-profit organization.

The SMASE program was founded in 1968 and officially incorporated in 1970, and serve Navajo students with special needs and disabilities. Their services also include programs for Navajo special needs adults, who attend to enlighten their sensory skills, effectively communicate, and

develop overall life-skills despite special limitations. The majority of funding for their road improvement project is derived from donations, which the presenters said is nowhere near the \$2.7 million goal.

Delegate Hale clarified to the committee members that the operational funding for the program comes from the state of Arizona and other external sources, however they are not able to fund road infrastructure projects and that is the purpose for the SMASE program in seeking assistance from the Navajo Nation.

BFC chair Council Delegate Seth Damon (Bááháálí, Chichiltah, Manuelito, Tsé Lichíí', Rock Springs, Tsayatoh) said he supported the legislation, but informed the program that there are nearly \$70 million in UUFB requests currently going through the legislative process, which would make it more difficult for the program to be awarded the funding.

“Thank you to the SMASE team here and the parents. I do believe there should be a more overall projected proposal to get matching funds from other sources, as well as get more dollars from the Síhasin Fund. We can take a more comprehensive approach for capital and infrastructure improvement,” said Delegate Damon.

Delegate Damon said the proposal should include fixing sidewalks, improve ADA accessibility, and provide repairs to existing buildings. He added that a proposal to the Síhasin Fund Subcommittee would be a more advantageous approach to receive funding, and offered his assistance to aid in developing the funding request.

In response to the Síhasin Fund recommendation, BFC member Council Delegate Tom Chee (Shiprock), who also serves on the subcommittee, said he supported the effort and would advocate on behalf of the initiative.

“People have not come to the basic belief that our students with special needs should have the same level of opportunities as regular education students. I really believe that is a part of the attitude that society has and we need to change that mindset,” said Delegate Chee.

The BFC recommended to table the legislation until the SMASE program is able to provide further information regarding past funding support and corrected documentation regarding proposed funding amounts.

BFC members tabled Legislation No. 0424-17 with one amendment to add language regarding an attached exhibit. It will also be considered by the Naabik'íyáti' Committee with the Navajo Nation Council serving as the final authority on the bill.

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