



## 23RD NAVAJO NATION COUNCIL OFFICE OF THE SPEAKER

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### **FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE**

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### **Resources and Development Committee addresses inconsistent annual rental permit fees for faith-based organizations**

**WINDOW ROCK** – Last Wednesday, the Resources and Development Committee considered Legislation No. 0131-18, which seeks to amend the yearly rental fee for the revocable use permit of Azee' Bee Nahaghá of Diné Nation, Inc. within the community of Chinle, Ariz.

The Azee' Bee Nahaghá of Diné Nation, Inc. state that they are a non-profit organization that advocates, supports, sustains, and conducts traditional healing that cultivate mental and social wellbeing, harmony and balance, and common goods for American Indian people, namely on the Navajo Nation.

According to the legislation, the organization has paid \$27,000 in permit fees to date and the legislation does not request for a refund, however it seeks to request a change to the revocable use permit annual fee rate from \$1,000 per year to \$150 per year.

Council Delegate Davis Filfred (Mexican Water, Aneth, Teecnospos, Tólikan, Red Mesa), sponsor for the legislation, said that the Azee' Bee Nahaghá of Diné Nation, Inc. has been overpaying for the revocable use permit for many years and asked the committee to adjust the fee rate for the organization.

“The organization has complied with all of the permit policies for many years and they generously paid \$1,000 a year for their permit use. To this day, they have paid \$27,000 in permit use fees. However, this is not a fair fee because many faith-based entities throughout the Nation pay less,” said Delegate Filfred. “Ideally, faith-based entities should be paying \$15 per acre.”

In 1992, a revocable permit for the organization was approved through resolution ACD-222-89 with a rental payment of \$1,000 a year to be paid to the Navajo Nation.

RDC member Council Delegate Jonathan Perry (Becenti, Crownpoint, Huerfano, Lake Valley, Nageezi, Nahodishgish, Tse'ii'ahi, Whiterock) raised concerns regarding the permit fee rate and asked if other faith-based entities were paying the same permit rates.

“There needs to be equality among all the churches on the Navajo Nation. How many churches are on the Navajo Nation and are they paying the same permit rates?” asked Delegate Perry.

Navajo Nation General Land Department manager Elerina Yazzie responded and said that there are approximately 330 churches on the Nation, however the permit fees are not consistent among the churches. For example, some churches are paying anywhere from \$1-15 per acre.

Delegate Perry recommended an amendment to the bill to eliminate the proposed annual fee of until the year of 2088, and thereafter would be required to pay approximately \$15 per acre.

RDC members voted 4-0 to approve the amendment.

RDC chair Council Delegate Alton Joe Shepherd (Jeddito, Cornfields, Ganado, Kin Dah Lichíí, Steamboat) expressed that all church permit fees should be consistent.

“Clarity within the policies is needed. It is unfair that some churches are overpaying and underpaying for permit fees,” said Delegate Shepherd.

At the end of the discussion, Azee’ Bee Nahaghá of Diné Nation, Inc. president Steven Benally expressed his appreciation to the committee for supporting the adjustment of the permit fees.

“The Azee’ Bee Nahaghá of Diné Nation, Inc. operates on donations, however, we do our best to provide the best faith-based services for the people in need. We complied with the permit fees since 1992 and overpaid. We only want fairness,” said Benally.

RDC members issued a directive to the Navajo Nation Department of Justice and Navajo Nation Division of Natural Resources to draft an amendment to the Navajo Nation Code to propose changes to the permit process for religious ceremonial sites to ensure a consistent annual fee.

The Resources and Development Committee approved Legislation No. 0131-18 with a vote of 4-0 with one amendment, and the committee serves as the final authority for the bill.

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