



The 24TH NAVAJO NATION COUNCIL  
Office of the Speaker

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## State Task Force meets on Utah State Legislative Priorities, forwards to Naabik'iyáti' Committee



*PHOTO: Darrel Williams, former Aneth Chapter President, Clarence Rockwell, executive director for the Navajo Utah Commission, and Asa Washines, legislative staff assistant for the Office of the Speaker, provide recommendations to the State Task Force of the 24th Navajo Nation Council on Dec. 20, 2019.*

WINDOW ROCK, Ariz. – Dec. 21, 2019 – The State Task Force of the 24th Navajo Nation Council met on Friday to discuss the state legislative priorities for the Utah portion of the Navajo Nation. The task force was established by the Naabik'iyáti' Committee to coordinate state-level government-to-government initiatives of the 24th Navajo Nation Council.

The task force heard from Clarence Rockwell, executive director for the Navajo Utah Commission, who reported that the commission looks forward to the finalization of a lobbyist that will work on Navajo priorities at the Utah legislature.

“One of the items we’ve been talking about is the Navajo Utah Water Rights Settlement. Currently the legislation is in Congress,” said Director Rockwell.

He stated that the State of Utah has been very supportive of the settlement effort, stating that Utah has already allocated an \$8 million contribution to the

settlement in anticipation of its passage.

Director Rockwell also outlined the education priorities the commission looks to promote. The education gap in the Utah portion of the Navajo Nation is complicated by high turnover, isolation, and funding issues.

“We want the Utah Legislature to reauthorize House Bill 43, but our current state representative is hard to rely upon because he has challenged Navajo on many issues,” said Director Rockwell.

Director Rockwell also advised the State Task Force on voting rights issues in the Utah Navajo region. In 2017, the county was forced to redraw election districts after 30 years going unchanged. This resulted in Navajos taking a majority in the San Juan County Commission for the first time in 2018. Director Rockwell said that in Nov. 2019, a proposition that would have opened the door to redo election boundaries was

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rejected narrowly by voters in the special election. He continued by stating that Representative Lyman has been proposing potential legislation to split the county into three separate counties.

Director Rockwell said that the Utah lobbyist, when they are onboard, will need to watch Rep. Lyman's legislation closely for proposals that may negatively affect Navajo representation.

Director Rockwell also explained that the commission is seeking support for road projects in and around Aneth Chapter.

The commission seeks additional support for broad-band implementation that will help develop education and economic development initiatives needed in the Utah portion of the Navajo Nation.

Council Delegate Charlaine Tso emphasized the importance of the Aneth road project to residents of Utah Navajo. She added that air quality, especially around McCracken Mesa, is an important issue to tackle.

Council Delegate Herman Daniels added that the road from Oljato to Navajo Mountain and education are important to his constituents of the Navajo Mountain region. Delegate Daniels also shared concerns about access to schools close to the state line.

"In Monument Valley, the school sits in the State of Utah, right across the state line with Arizona. A lot of local kids want to go to school there but they can't," said Delegate Daniels.

The task force also heard from former Aneth Chapter President Darrell Williams, who also spoke to the challenges Utah Navajos face in pushing roads projects forward.

"It's very unlikely that Rep. Lyman will sponsor legislation to support the road project between Montezuma Creek and Aneth," said Williams.

Attorney Steve Boos, who has worked on Navajo voting rights issues in Utah, reported that the state's prefile period is currently open for legislations to be considered at its January session. The legislation, however, will not be available until the next few weeks.

The task force asked Mr. Boos to provide his input regarding the legislative priorities for Utah due mainly to his extensive experience litigating for Navajo rights.

"On the San Juan County voting rights issues, what Mr. Rockwell said is fairly accurate," said Boos.

Boos said that the San Juan County Commission's Navajo majority has been facing opposition from local, mostly non-Navajo residents, who contend that

the commission's decisions should be decided through referendum vote. The state's general position has been negative towards referendums, said Boos.

In response to the discussion, State Task Force Chair Mark Freeland said that the priorities and issues with Utah water rights will require close coordination with Senator Udall. Chair Freeland said that Senator Udall has been a strong proponent of the settlement.

Director Rockwell added that, since Utah Governor Gary Herbert is not seeking reelection, Utah tribes are concerned with the appointments to the Utah Division of Indian Affairs. Those appointments would only be serving the remainder of the governor's term of nearly a year.

Asa Washines, legislative staff assistant with the Office of the Speaker, said that the Utah attorney general's term is also up in a year. He also gave the State Task Force recommendations on upcoming elections in Utah and strategies for additional lobbying efforts by the Navajo Nation.

Delegate Charlaine Tso added that the Navajo voters both on and off the Navajo Nation have been approaching her about addressing support of Missing and Murdered Indigenous People and LGBTQI+ initiatives.

Milton Bluehouse, Jr., deputy chief of staff for the Office of the President and Vice President, stated further that Utah legislators have been seeking input on the creation of a task force to address MMIW at the state level. They will continue to coordinate with legislative staff and proponents of the initiative to design the task force.

The task force will work over the next few weeks to draft a supporting resolution for the Naabik'iyáti' Committee to consider that addresses all the Navajo Nation's legislative priorities for the Utah legislature.

The task force also agreed to forward updated drafts of the Navajo Arizona and New Mexico priorities and initiatives for 2019-2020 to the Naabik'iyáti' Committee for possible resolution and adoption.

The State Task Force hopes the updated state legislative priorities are adopted by the Navajo Nation ahead of the legislative sessions of all states in Jan. 2020.

The State Task Force of the 24th Navajo Nation Council was established by the Naabik'iyáti' Committee to address priorities for each of the surrounding states of Arizona, Utah, Colorado, and New Mexico.

Hon. Mark Freeland chairs the State Task Force and Hon. Paul Begay is the vice chair. The task force membership includes Hon. Kee Allen Begay, Jr., Herman Daniels, Pernell Halona, and Charlaine Tso.

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