



23RD NAVAJO NATION COUNCIL OFFICE OF THE SPEAKER

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Budget and Finance Committee issues directive to release funds for public safety facility

RAMAH, N.M. – On Tuesday, the Budget and Finance Committee received a report from the Controller of the Navajo Nation, Jim R. Parris, who informed the committee that the Office of the Controller and Office of Management and Budget have not released funding for the construction of a police and fire substation at the Twin Arrows Navajo Casino Resort, despite Council’s approval of the expenditure plan.

Council approved resolution CAP-20-16 in April that adopted the Síhasin Fund Twin Arrows Police and Fire Station Economic/Community Development Expenditure Plan that allocated approximately \$4.5 million to construct a 15,000 square-foot police/fire substation that would consist of a 9-1-1 dispatch room, a three-bay garage for fire trucks, sleeping quarters for public safety personnel, training rooms, and administrative offices.

According to Parris, his office was directed to halt the release of the funds for the construction by the Navajo Nation Office of the President and Vice President legal advisor Karis Begaye, who questioned if the resolution required President Russell Begaye’s signature and requested an opinion on the matter from the Navajo Nation Department of Justice.

BFC member Council Delegate Leonard Tsosie (Baca/Prewitt, Casamero Lake, Counselor, Littlewater, Ojo Encino, Pueblo Pintado, Torreon, Whitehorse Lake) informed Parris that the construction of the substation is of utmost importance.

“I suggest looking at the authorization of the Síhasin Fund—it’s to comply with the gaming compact in Arizona and to provide police and fire safety to the Twin Arrows area. How can the President of the Navajo Nation say no to that? The construction season is going to end in the middle of July. If we do not have it running by the middle of July, might as well kiss it goodbye for another year,” said Delegate Tsosie.

Delegate Tsosie added that the resolution did not require the signature of President Begaye and that Council serves as the final authority on the expenditure plan. He said the Síhasin Fund is not a comprehensive budget or a trust fund that would be subject to the Appropriations Act, and that the Síhasin Fund Subcommittee was created to develop and implement expenditure plans for the fund.

In 2014, the Council adopted the Navajo Nation Breach of Trust Settlement Act that created the Síhasin Fund and mandated that the funds from the settlement agreement be used for the planning and development of regional infrastructure supporting economic and community development, and educational opportunities for Navajo citizens. The Síhasin Fund Subcommittee was then established in April 2015 and was tasked with recommending expenditure plans as mandated by the act.

Delegate Tsosie said when the act was signed into law, it was understood that the Council would act as final authority on expenditure plans specifically for the Síhasin Fund.

Parris said he is in support of constructing the public safety substation, but he wanted to consult with the OPVP to gain further understanding regarding NNDOJ's opinion, which stated that the resolution requires the president's signature.

"I want to figure out why they are holding this up from their position. I am supportive and I can't tell you what the thinking is right now that is coming from the NNDOJ, because this is not a trust fund. This is a different kind of funding arrangement and has approval from Council, and I believe it has the authority that it needs," said Parris.

He added that it was important to work together to build a relationship based on communication and understanding to protect the investment of the Navajo Nation, and that he agrees that this is important to the Nation and the people residing near the casino.

BFC member Council Delegate Tom Chee said the Navajo people have a right to be protected and the lack of public safety facilities throughout the Navajo Nation is causing distress to communities because citizens do not feel safe.

"Mr. Parris, when you go to the President, you can say, 'it's not about us, it's about the people of the Navajo Nation.' We have subjected them to such distressful conditions for so long. It's time that we set aside our differences. I don't care who gets the credit, the point is let's get these buildings funded and let's move forward," said Delegate Chee.

At the conclusion of the discussion, Delegate Tsosie recommended a directive to the OOC and OMB to carry out CAP-20-16 and release the funds so construction can begin as soon as possible, and if both offices fail to respond to the directive, the chairman of the BFC shall seek assistance from the Navajo Nation Office of Legislative Counsel to enforce the resolution.

BFC member Council Delegate Tuchoney Slim, Jr. (Bodaway/Gap, Coppermine, K'ai'Bii'Tó, LeChee, Tonalea/Red Lake) made a point in reminding committee members that delaying the construction of the public safety substation at Twin Arrows would be detrimental to economic development and revenues generated.

BFC members voted 3-0 to accept the report with one directive.

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