



23RD NAVAJO NATION COUNCIL OFFICE OF THE SPEAKER

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Council leadership garners support for Utah Navajo initiatives



Photo: Council members met with Utah House of Representatives Speaker Greg Hughes on Feb. 8 during the Utah American Indian Caucus Day. (From left to right: Council Delegate Seth Damon, Speaker LoRenzo Bates, Speaker Greg Hughes, Delegate Davis Filfred, Delegate Herman Daniels, Jr., and Delegate Nathaniel Brown.)

SALT LAKE CITY, U.T. – On Monday, members from the 23rd Navajo Nation Council attended the 2016 Utah American Indian Caucus Day in Salt Lake City, and had the opportunity to meet with top state leaders to discuss education, sacred sites, and infrastructure development.

The Utah State Legislature and Utah Division of Indian Affairs hosted an annual caucus that allows tribal leaders to meet with state leadership to discuss issues impacting tribal communities and to promote networking and partnerships between tribes, state organizations, and state leadership.

Speaker LoRenzo Bates, along with Council Delegates Davis Filfred, Nathaniel Brown, Herman Daniels, Jr., and Seth Damon, met with Utah Senate President Wayne L. Niederhauser (Dist. 9 – R), Utah Speaker of the House Greg Hughes (Dist. 51 – R), Utah Sen. David P. Hinkins (Dist. 27 – R), and Utah Sen. Howard A. Stephenson (Dist. 11 – R).

Delegate Filfred, who represents several Utah communities, provided a position statement to the state leaders, which outlined several issues concerning Utah Navajo.

“The statement seeks support from Utah state leaders on issues that are important to the Navajo Nation,” said Delegate Filfred. “I want ensure we have a strengthened partnership and understanding so we can begin to work on these issues with strong support from state leaders.”

Delegate Filfred advocated for immediate attention and support for Utah Senate Bill 14, sponsored by Utah Sen. Kevin T. Van Tassell (Dist 26 – R), which seeks to appropriate \$2 million to create a pilot program that would fund stipends, recruitment, and retention of teachers who teach in schools with predominantly Native American student populations.

S.B. 14 stemmed from House Bill 33, which was signed into law by Utah Gov. Gary Herbert in March 2015, which created the American Indian-Alaskan Native Education Commission to address the educational achievement gap of the state’s Native American students. The Commission assesses challenges, develops solutions, and provides recommended priorities for legislative action.

Relating to education, Speaker Bates informed state leaders of a cultural issue that has raised concern among Council members and the Navajo public, regarding the proposed construction of Bluff Elementary School on a location that was deemed to be an archeological site that contains sacred items and potential burial sites.

“There is a school to be built in Bluff, Utah. As it went through, it was determined that it had cultural significance in terms of burial sites on that piece of land. Given the fact that 80-percent of the students are Navajo, it is a concern for their family members and the Navajo Nation,” said Speaker Bates, urging state leaders to push for a new location for the school.

According to a report from the Navajo Utah Commission, the San Juan School District has indicated their intent to proceed with construction despite the Navajo Nation’s objection.

Delegate Brown said he met with Navajo educators in the Utah Granite School District on a proposed Navajo language preservation program that would be modeled after similar language programs from the Maori Nation in New Zealand, and requested support from state leaders for the initiative.

“We are looking into a huge opportunity to observe and partner with programs like the Maori Language Immersion Curriculum program to begin molding our own programs on the Navajo Nation to further strengthen and promote Diné Bizaad (Navajo language),” said Delegate Brown.

Delegate Brown added that he intends to meet with Maori language immersion specialists to begin information sharing and to create pathways to begin developing and implementing similar immersion programs on the Navajo Nation. The partnership will be conducted under the umbrella of the Pacific Heritage Academy of Utah, according to Delegate Brown.

The Navajo delegation also sought support for appropriations and the reconstruction of roads near the communities of Aneth-Montezuma Creek, Oljato, and Monument Valley, and for redistricting in San Juan County to promote fair representation of Native Americans in the area.

Speaker Hughes expressed gratitude to the Council members and said it was important for tribes to share information and said he appreciated the position statement because it provided him with a better understanding of the needs of the Navajo Nation and its people.

“If you don’t feel like it’s benefitting you, then I am missing that perspective. I am missing that information and I am glad you are providing me with that today,” said Speaker Hughes. “We do a lot of talking about these issues and it’s time to make some progress with them.”

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