



23RD NAVAJO NATION COUNCIL OFFICE OF THE SPEAKER

FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE

October 21, 2016

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Emergency legislation to address public safety response systems referred back to Council's standing committees

WINDOW ROCK – During the third day of the Fall Council Session, Council members considered Legislation No. 0370-16, an emergency legislation to appropriate approximately \$3.8 million from the Síhasin Fund to the Navajo Nation Division of Public Safety's Department of Emergency Management, to fund Emergency 911, Amber Alert, and Rural Addressing systems throughout the Navajo Nation.

According to the legislation, nearly \$2 million would be allocated to the E-911 system, \$850,000 to implement the Amber Alert system, and \$1 million to go toward the Rural Addressing system.

Council Delegate Kee Allen Begay, Jr. (Low Mountain, Many Farms, Nazlini, Tachee/Blue Gap, Tselani/Cottonwood), sponsor of the emergency legislation, said it was imperative to implement the emergency response systems as soon as possible to ensure the safety of Navajo citizens and improve emergency response times.

"What we are requesting is just the tip of the iceberg of a situation that we have at the NNDPS. This is to protect the Navajo people and children who are vulnerable. This is to fully implement the entire plan on the Navajo Nation," said Delegate Begay. "It will notify citizens with Amber Alerts and any other emergency information that is important to disseminate publicly."

Delegate Begay added that the funding would also be utilized to purchase hardware equipment and computer software to send notifications out to the Navajo Nation, as well as to other governmental agencies that aid in the Nation's emergency response efforts, such as surrounding counties and states.

Council Delegate Dwight Witherspoon (Black Mesa, Forest Lake, Hardrock, Pinõn, Whippoorwill) made a recommendation to Council members to refer the emergency legislation back to the Council's standing committees to ensure fiscal responsibility has been satisfied.

"If we are ready to vote without an expenditure plan, to me, it's like we just throw money at the issue to solve the problem. There certainly is a need for money, but for these particular amounts, there are questions that need to be discussed. There could be grants that can cover these amounts," said Delegate Witherspoon.

He added that allowing the standing committees to consider the legislation would garner support for the initiative and committees would be afforded the opportunity to provide input on the emergency systems and funding.

In support of the referral recommendation, Council Delegate Leonard Tsosie (Baca/Prewitt, Casamero Lake, Counselor, Littlewater, Ojo Encino, Pueblo Pintado, Torreon, Whitehorse Lake) said it was important for the standing committees to discuss the legislation in order to identify other alternative forms of funding.

“The way I look at this is that this is not an emergency. Not acting on it—the sky will not fall. I think there is dishonesty with this legislation. There has been money in the form of grants that was given to the NNDPS,” said Delegate Tsosie. “In fact, take the emergency clause off and refer it back to the committees and let them go vet it to get the answers to those important questions.”

Delegate Tsosie said it was important for the Navajo Nation to also reach out to county, state, and federal agencies, who may provide funding and resource assistance for the systems.

Council Delegate Amber Kanazbah Crotty (Beclabito, Cove, Gadi’i’áhi/To’Koi, Red Valley, Tooh Haltsooi, Toadlena/Two Grey Hills, Tsé ałnáoz’t’l’í) disagreed with the referral amendment and argued that the purpose of the emergency legislation is to debate it on the Council floor, in which all members have the opportunity to ask critical questions regarding the funding for the emergency systems.

“I would say this issue should be debated here on the floor and give Council the opportunity to hear the data, and give yourself time to really sink in the dire nature that our people have out there, whether they are on the roads, at home, at the schools, or in their communities,” said Delegate Crotty. “As we allow days and hours to pass by, we are doing a disservice to our community members.”

Delegate Crotty added that the standing committees are authorized by the Navajo Nation Council and are able to discuss the emergency legislation without having it referred back, which would cause delay to the process of implementing the emergency response systems.

Council Delegate Raymond Smith, Jr. (Houck, Klagetoh, Nahat’a Dziil, Tsé Si áni, Wide Ruins) reminded Council members that the emergency legislation was added onto the agenda by a vote of the Council on the opening day of the Fall Council Session.

“I think it’s imperative that we keep this on the agenda, debate it, and vote upon it. The money is there,” said Delegate Smith. “It is time to talk about it now and that’s our job as council delegates, to consider these emergencies. We really need this Amber Alert system, and our public safety personnel have been advocating for this initiative for quite some time now.”

At the closing of the discussion, Delegate Crotty questioned the status of the legislation if it were to be referred back to the standing committees. The Office of Legislative Counsel advised Delegate Crotty that the legislation would still be deemed as an emergency.

Council members voted 10-9 to refer Legislation No. 0370-16 back to the Council's standing committees for further consideration.

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