



23RD NAVAJO NATION COUNCIL OFFICE OF THE SPEAKER

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Navajo Nation Council approves amendments to the land acquisition process

WINDOW ROCK – During a special session held on Tuesday, the Navajo Nation Council approved Legislation No. 0101-16 sponsored by Council Delegate Alton Joe Shepherd (Jeddito, Cornfields, Ganado, Kin Dah Lichíí, Steamboat), which seeks to amend the land acquisition process and to enact the Navajo Nation Land Acquisition Act.

Under the current land acquisition process created in 1954, the Resources and Development Committee is authorized to consider and investigate land purchase proposals and to issue recommendations to the Council. The Council and the Bureau of Indian Affairs then consider all appraisals and proposals for approval, which are then considered by the president.

Delegate Shepherd and Navajo Land Department manager Mike Halona, said the Navajo Nation has lost potential land purchases in the past due to the lengthy and complicated process currently in place, which can take two years or longer to gain final approval in some cases.

Among the proposed changes in the legislation includes giving limited authority to the executive director of the Navajo Nation Division of Natural Resources, to grant final approval for the purchase or disposal of land not to exceed \$5 million per calendar year.

Amounts between the sums of \$5 million and \$20 million would require final approval by the RDC, and amounts exceeding \$20 million would require final approval by the Naabik'iyáti' Committee.

According to Delegate Shepherd, the changes are intended to lessen the amount of time it takes to grant approval and to finalize land purchases that would provide more economic development opportunities for the Navajo Nation.

“We are trying to streamline the process to make it more timely and efficient,” said Delegate Shepherd.

Council Delegate Leonard Tsosie (Baca/Prewitt, Casamero Lake, Counselor, Littlewater, Ojo Encino, Pueblo Pintado, Torreon, Whitehorse Lake), who is the sponsor of a separate legislation that also seeks to amend the land acquisition process by creating a commission to review and approve land purchases, urged his colleagues to vote down the bill stating that it grants too much authority to the DNR executive director.

“We are going to be delegating some serious authority to one person,” stated Delegate Tsoie, adding that the legislation lacked adequate accountability measures and oversight for land acquisitions, which may lead to questionable purchases.

Delegate Shepherd in response pointed out that the legislation also requires the Navajo Land Department to bring forth additional rules and regulations to guide land acquisitions, which will require final approval by the Resources and Development Committee.

The Council also approved four amendments to the legislation, including one proposed by Council Delegate Seth Damon (Bááháálí, Chichiltah, Manuelito, Tsé Lichíí’, Rock Springs, Tsayatoh), to add the Budget and Finance Committee to the review and approval process for land acquisitions that exceed \$5 million.

Funds for land purchases are generated through the Navajo Nation’s Land Acquisition Trust Fund established in 1993. Each year, the Nation invests two-percent of its annual revenues to the trust fund to acquire properties to expand the Nation’s land base.

At the conclusion of Tuesday’s discussion, Council members approved the legislation with vote of 18-2. President Russell Begaye will have ten calendar days to consider the resolution once the resolution is delivered to the Office of the President and Vice President.

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