



Health, Education, and Human Services hears recommendations of former Miss Navajo Nation titleholders for plan of operation update

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WINDOW ROCK, Ariz. — A comprehensive review of the Office of Miss Navajo Nation (OMNN) plan of operation was completed by the Health, Education, and Human Services Committee (HEHSC) of the 24th Navajo Nation Council on Feb. 17 that included input and recommendations from former Miss Navajo Nation title holders and current program administrators.

The HEHSC carried out the consultation as part of the Council's consideration of Legislation No. 0221-20, sponsored by Speaker Seth Damon (Bááháá'í, Chichiltah, Manuelito, Tsé Łichíí', Rock Springs, Tsayatoh), which would amend and update the OMNN's plan of operation.

The legislation was developed following the administrative extension by executive memorandum of the current Miss Navajo's term due to the pandemic. The plan amendments introduced in September 2020 included from current OMNN staff.

The Naabik'iyáti' Committee previously discussed the bill and directed the HEHSC facilitate input from former titleholders before approving amendments.

An extended group of former Miss Navajos was represented during the work session by Angela Barney Nez, Miss Navajo 1975-1976, and Marla Billey, Miss Navajo 2003-2004.

The group recommended more involvement by an advisory committee of former Miss Navajo Nation titleholders. In particular, the selection committee for Miss Navajo competition judges would include former Miss Navajos under the recommendations.

Currently, recommendations for judges are solicited by the OMNN under an undesignated process that sometimes includes former titleholders.

HEHSC Chair Daniel E. Tso (Baca/Prewitt, Casamero Lake, Counselor, Littlewater, Ojo Encino, Pueblo Pintado, Torreon, Whitehorse Lake) drew the attention of the committee to the issue that the OMNN was transferred between the Division of Human Resources and the Office of the President and Vice President (OPVP) under executive memorandum.

In doing so, the selection of Miss Navajo competition judges became subject to a greater degree of political designation.

The group also discussed the scholarship benefit associated with winning the title. Updated language would designate the administration of the scholarship through the Office of Navajo Nation Scholarship and Financial Assistance and would mandate the award be sent directly to schools.

OMNN Program Supervisor Karletta Benally indicated the scholarship was formerly treated as a severance award at the end of a Miss Navajo's term. A payment would be generated in the award amount and a check delivered to the outgoing Miss Navajo.

The HEHSC also received recommendations regarding the inclusion of mission statement language and the structure of the plan of operation.

Although the language contained in the mission statement reflect important aspects of the role of Miss Navajo Nation, delegates asked if its inclusion in the plan of operation created performance measures too broad to assess.

Council Delegate Paul Begay (Bodaway/Gap, Coppermine, K'ai'ibii'tó, Lechee, Tonalea), member of HEHSC, acknowledged the contest and the contestants face contemporary changes. He indicated the language of the plan of operation should include the traditional cultural figures Miss Navajo is to exemplify, as a matter of guiding those that follow.

The Committee proposed reorganizing the mission statement and purpose sections of the proposed plan of operation to bring the structure of the document in-line with the general format of other plans of operation recently updated by the Navajo Nation Council.

Members of the HEHSC also acknowledged the need to address exigent circumstances, like the coronavirus (Covid-19) pandemic, that disrupt the normal pageant process.

Barney Nez and Billey indicated virtual pageants took place across Indian Country. A new Miss Navajo could be selected if the pageant and competition were not able to take place alongside the annual Navajo Nation Fair.

The committee accepted a recommendation by former Miss Navajo Nation representatives to delete proposed language allowing an extended term for a current titleholder. Addressing exigent circumstances will require further consideration, HEHSC members acknowledged.

Delegates also considered language regarding the biological sex of candidates. HEHSC Vice Chair Carl Roessel Slater (Lukachukai, Rock Point, Round Rock, Tsaile/Wheatfields, Tsé Ch'izhi) questioned the Navajo Nation government's role in legislating gender or biological sex requirements, noting differing Navajo beliefs about identity.

Council Delegate Charlene Tso (Mexican Water, Aneth, Teecnospos, Tó'íkan, Red Mesa), member of the HEHSC, acknowledged the complexity of the issue and urged involvement by Navajo elders on the subject.

At the conclusion of the work session, Chairman Tso indicated the Office of Legislative Services would be tasked with developing updated legislative language based on the discussion.

The HEHSC will then vote on recommending the language to the Naabik'iyáti' Committee.

Wednesday's work session followed a virtual public hearing on the plan of operation legislation held Jan. 18 and hosted by the HEHSC.

The Feb. 17 work session may be accessed online at: <https://youtu.be/FJluiGLTXnM>.

The OMNN plan of operation was last updated in 2000, which transferred the OMNN from the Office of the Speaker to the Office of the President and Vice President.

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