



STATE OF THE NAVAJO NATION ADDRESS

President Buu Nygren

Presented to the

25th NAVAJO NATION COUNCIL

JANUARY 24, 2023





STATE OF THE NAVAJO NATION ADDRESS

PRESIDENT BUU NYGREN

Presented to the

25th NAVAJO NATION COUNCIL

JANUARY 24, 2023

Madam Speaker, Madam Vice President, Madam Chief Justice, Navajo Nation Council Delegates, relatives and guests. *Yá'át'ééh!* I wish each and every one of you and your families a happy, healthy and prosperous New Year.

I was very pleased to come to the Council Chambers after your session adjourned last evening to personally congratulate the new, first woman speaker – the Honorable Speaker Crystalyne Curley. All of us are all aware of the many historic firsts the Navajo Nation has been experiencing, and here is yet another significant one. From the First Lady and me, our congratulations once again, Madam Speaker.

To begin, I would like to send birthday greetings to our oldest Navajo Code Talker, John Kinsel, Sr., who turned 106 on January 22nd. Happy birthday, Mr. Kinsel, from the Navajo Nation Council and the Navajo president's office ... and Semper Fi!

Let's also remember two fine servants of the Navajo people who we recently lost: the late Arizona State Senator James Henderson who was a Vietnam Veteran and a long-serving senator, and the late Norman John II, who served on the Navajo Nation Council for 20 years. To their families, all of us here offer our condolences for the loss of these two fine servants of the people. *Ahe'hee.*

I am pleased to present my first State of the Navajo Nation address to you and to congratulate our returning delegates. I want to welcome our 16 new delegates, and to acknowledge the transition we are enjoying with nine of the 24 delegates being women.

As with my Vice President Richelle Montoya and Madam Speaker Curley, the time is right for Navajo women to raise their profiles and take their proper roles in the leadership of our government. Congratulations and welcome to you all.

These past two weeks of my administration have been busy, to say the least, not only with meeting state elected officials but with the sudden critical needs of our Nation.

On Sunday, I was fortunate to be invited to represent the Navajo Nation to meet the Vice President of the United States Kamala Harris during her visit to Luke Air Force Base. It was an honor to be placed sixth in her receiving line.

Last week I spent an hour with New Mexico Governor Michelle Lujan-Grisham following her State of the State address to the joint session of the legislature, and nearly as long with Arizona Governor Katie Hobbs. Both were very gracious with their time and their comments. Both offered their greatest support to the Navajo Nation and encouraged me to call upon them whenever we need their help.

I told Governor Lujan-Grisham that the Navajo Nation will make every effort to spend a backlog of millions of dollars in capital outlay funds that we have neglected to spend through the years. That is at the top of my agenda.

To do this, and with the Council's help, we need to analyze the reasons for the backlog and develop solutions to streamline the process to spend these funds within their designated timeframes. It is critical to provide needed services to our people and to maintain our long partnership with New Mexico.

I told Governor Hobbs that I would like to see legislation introduced in Arizona so the Navajo Nation can participate in Arizona's TPT process. That would allow us to receive a percentage of sales tax dollars Navajos send to the state, just as any other Arizona town, city or municipality receives.

If we had that revenue, we could do much more to build our economy. Those returning tax dollars would enable us to build out our businesses to send more tax dollars to the state and, in return, receive back even more with each fiscal cycle.

In Many Farms Sunday, I met with Interior Secretary Deb Haaland for the fourth time in the last two weeks. She was on Navajo as part of her year-long, cross-country investigation into the negative impacts of more than 350 federal Indian boarding schools in the United States. It is called "The Road to Healing."

Secretary Haaland is from the Laguna Pueblo. Her grandparents were subjected to the boarding school system. The secretary came to hear the tragic stories of our children – now adults and grandparents – who endured horrific trauma as students in BIA boarding schools.

For those Navajos who told their stories, being heard and acknowledged is the first step to healing any trauma, including punishment for speaking their own language. Many carry lifelong scars. Boarding schools are one of the reasons many parents chose not to teach their children to speak the Navajo language – so that what happened to them would not happen to their children.

I thanked Secretary Haaland and Governor Hobbs for being here yesterday and for listening with empathy in their hearts.

Our traumas have not ended. We are now dealing with another crisis – Missing and Murdered Indigenous People. Secretary Haaland, Governor Hobbs and Governor Lujan-Grisham all have agreed to stand with us as we confront this crisis.

Let me acknowledge here among us on the 25th Council another champion of this cause, Delegate Amber Crotty, who has been a longtime leader to bring awareness to the MMIP crisis and comfort to families. Thank you, Delegate Crotty.

To ensure we diligently address the MMIP issue, I have appointed John Tsosie to my staff. John is co-founder of Walking the Healing Path, a non-profit organization he started in 2003 with his father, Ernest Tsosie Jr.

John's goal is and has been to educate tribal communities about domestic violence which is so widespread on the Navajo Nation. We need to keep the discussion going about MMIP, domestic violence and their various causes in order to break its generational cycle.

By now, our people and the world have heard that the Navajo Nation's COVID-19 mask mandate has been lifted for businesses and public places. To all of our tribal employees who continued to stand their posts from the beginning of this terrible pandemic, I say sincerely, thank you for your dedication and bravery.

For the thousands of our people whose jobs were lost, lifting the mandate can help you bring more business back to many places. This will allow more people to go back to work. Lifting the mandate allows many of our Navajo businesses, stores and parks to return to being fully open. Our government buildings and chapter houses can become busy again. It was about time to take this step.

COVID will remain with us so wearing a mask is optional for everyone. Being updated on vaccinations, washing hands and sanitizing are all actions we can do to protect ourselves and our families, especially our elderly. Masks are still required in schools. Health care facilities and nursing homes will continue to set their own policies.

It is wrong to assume that my administration is taking this pandemic lightly. The pandemic has been extremely costly in lives and livelihoods. Nothing about that is taken lightly.

We are also still dealing with a snow emergency that hit Sawmill Chapter and the entire Defiance Plateau last week. Some areas received more than three feet of snow, stranding people in their homes and cutting off services for several days. First to respond to this emergency were our partners in Apache County.

The county's Emergency Management Department, under the supervision of Director Brian Hounshell, was ready to respond as soon as it received the call. It arrived with personnel, Snowcats, snowmobiles, drones, food and drinks for workers.

The first role of government is protection of its citizens. Unfortunately, our Navajo Nation Emergency Management Department was hindered by our cumbersome system which is something we need to address. I will be turning to you for legislative and financial remedies to help correct these old inefficiencies that slow our emergency response. In a world affected by climate change, emergency management is a critical service.

I would like to recognize two individuals among our public safety personnel who helped coordinate our emergency response quickly and professionally once they were brought aboard – Mr. Harland Cleveland and Ms. Lavina Nez.

Mr. Cleveland is the special operations coordinator for the Navajo Police Department. Because of his vast experience, he was delegated Emergency Management director. Ms. Nez served as his deputy Emergency Management director. Both are highly trained and have worked 13 presidential emergency declarations in the past.

Mr. Cleveland immediately reached out to the Arizona Department of Emergency Management and to FEMA to request assistance. He remained in contact with both Apache and Navajo counties' Emergency Management Departments which generously responded.

With the assistance of Chief of Staff Patrick Sandoval, he coordinated welfare checks and food delivery. Mr. Cleveland reported he was unable to get the Emergency Management Disaster Account operating. We coordinated among the right departments and now, under my administration, the Navajo Nation has access to the \$500,000 in the account to begin to purchase food, water and other necessities for this and future emergencies.

The highest priority of this response was human life and safety. With the help of our Community Health Representatives, we identified high-risk, elderly individuals who are either wheelchair dependent, oxygen dependent or dialysis patients who needed to get out. CHRs continue to identify more individuals who need special assistance. We had no loss of life.

Mr. Cleveland has reported that he will collect the required data needed to meet FEMA's minimum threshold request. A major disaster declaration for FEMA is \$250,000. He will seek a joint preliminary damage assessment through FEMA to evaluate road damage and to assess the need for other emergency protective measures.

A situation report has been prepared that describes what roads have been cleared and what pending tasks remain. Updates have been transmitted to the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers, the BIA Area Office, and the State of New Mexico.

I want to express my thanks to Apache and Navajo Counties for the excellent assistance and professionalism they have shown the Navajo Nation. *Ahéhee'*.

Honorable Council Delegates, this emergency is not over. As the weather warms and snow thaws, it will become a mud emergency. Navajo Department of Transportation Director Garrett Silversmith and his staff have been there since the emergency began. They set up the War Room in the NDOT offices to coordinate all activities and they responded with the equipment they have. But they need more.

NDOT, like the Division of Public Safety, has substantial equipment needs required to confront the next emergency. To rent a Snowcat would have cost NDOT \$33,000 with an additional \$20,000 to transport it here. One is needed, though. So it makes fiscal sense for NDOT to purchase its own.

That's far from enough. Because of a shortage of equipment, our police officers had to borrow tire chains for their units just to make it to the impacted areas. Because of this, I will ask the Council again for a legislative and financial solution to get our divisions the equipment the Navajo Nation needs in order to protect our citizens. These are long-standing problems that have to be addressed this year.

There are other needs, many needs. As we learned during the two-month transition period, our Navajo workforce is often overworked and underpaid. Just within our tribal government, we have an employment crisis and a housing crisis. There are between 1,200 and 1,500 vacancies in tribal positions. Yet when a Navajo applies for a job within our tribal government, the application and background check process is often so lengthy, many of these applicants give up.

Applicants who would be a perfect fit for a job may find that they don't meet some requirements so they are eliminated as unqualified, while another without the specific experience required gets the position. This happens when the Department of Personnel assesses applicants' qualifications rather than having the departments assess qualifications.

We must modify our system so that the departments that need employees are a key part of the selection process. Not doing so allows these problems to continue.

Members of the Council, the same thing happens with our best-educated and most highly-qualified applicants – from maintenance to Water Resources to DOJ. By the time the employment process is completed, they are often recruited away to another job in a border town or metropolitan area.

Many times prospective employees are willing to sacrifice higher pay and amenities found in cities in order to return home. It's disheartening to learn that it's their own tribal government's roadblocks that get in their way.

I believe I was elected because I want to address these kinds of problems. I want to make working on the Navajo Nation and living on the Navajo Nation attractive to young professionals who want to return – just like me. I can't do this by executive order. I need you, members of the Council, to buy in to mending our bureaucratic inefficiencies, and to see these tribal jobs filled so that the Nation can better serve our citizens.

As that is happening, we need to address the Navajo Nation's housing crisis. For Navajos to return home for work, they need a place to live. We need to build homes, townhouses, apartment complexes or the problems we see will just remain for another generation to fix.

Right now, the Navajo Department of Justice has a shortage of 16 positions. These jobs can't be filled if new employees have nowhere to live. The same goes for division directors, program managers and workers in many departments. If we truly wish to bring our best and brightest home, we need to address this housing shortage.

Let's consider our needs: We need medical centers. We need assisted living facilities for our elderly. We need housing. We need roads. We need gravel pits to build and maintain roads. For 50 years our people have asked for water and power line extensions. We need more police officers, fire fighters and EMTs. And we need teachers. They all will need somewhere to live.

We need to address land reform, infrastructure needs and taking care of our energy economy. All of these issues are interconnected.

So where do we start? I would like to revisit with you what ARPA funds have not been put to use, why, and whether we can ensure these never-before-seen funds are used to address infrastructure and broadband needs.

To get these things fixed, the people and I need Council's help. As dark and complex as our problems may seem, simple solutions are hiding in the light. There is only one Team Navajo and that is us.

This is my vision that I hope you share. We can and we will solve these difficulties in government by rolling up our sleeves and facing these decades-old problems that we created ourselves.

Members of the Council and my Navajo people, *Ahe'hee*.





CONTACT THE ADMINISTRATION

