



25th Navajo Nation Council

25TH NAVAJO NATION COUNCIL OFFICE OF THE SPEAKER

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25th Navajo Nation Council passes legislation to allow virtual attendance at chapter meetings



PHOTO: Delegate Vince James presented Legislation No. 0202-23, stating that virtual attendance at chapter meetings is beneficial to establishing quorum to keep chapter business moving forward.

WINDOW ROCK, Ariz. – On Tuesday, the 25th Navajo Nation Council approved Legislation No. 0202-23, sponsored by Delegate Vince R. James (Jeddito, Cornfields, Ganado, Kin Dah Lichí, Steamboat), which will amend Title 26 of the Navajo Nation Code to allow for virtual attendance at chapter meetings if signed into law by the Navajo Nation President.

In 2020, the Navajo Nation enacted emergency measures to mitigate the spread of the Coronavirus pandemic. Due to the shutting down of government offices, one measure enacted was to allow Navajo Nation employees to work from home and to allow chapters and chapter members to use virtual meetings to continue necessary work.

On June 15, 2023, Navajo Nation President Dr. Buu Nygren deactivated the Public Health State of Emergency for the Navajo Nation, returning government operations to pre-COVID-19 status.

“Honorable Council Delegates, I’ll leave this decision to you. Throughout the pandemic, it’s been important to have virtual attendance at chapter meetings,” Delegate James said. “Continuing to allow virtual attendance at chapter meetings is beneficial to establishing quorum which allows chapter business to keep moving forward.”

The legislation was met with insightful debate, with concerns surfacing on the Council floor addressing the inability to make quorum at the chapter level. Without quorum, chapters cannot act on important initiatives for their communities, including budgetary issues.

Delegate Danny Simpson (Becenti, Lake Valley, Nahodishgish, Standing Rock, Whiterock, Huerfano, Nageezi, Crownpoint) said the issue affects the eight chapters he represents, and that a pathway forward may be through a referendum to allow Navajo voters to consider options such as reducing chapter meeting quorum requirements.

“Around the Navajo Nation, we’re hearing this issue about chapters not getting quorum. I face this with the eight chapters I represent. Half the chapters I represent can get quorum. The other four are not able to. I’m stuck in the middle here,” he said. “How do we fix this? Since we’re talking about Title 26, the Local Governance Act, maybe we give it back to the people and do a referendum at the local level to reduce quorum.”

Delegate Eugenia Charles-Newton (Shiprock) weighed the pros and cons of the issue, saying that the legislation supports increased chapter participation but does not address verification of chapter membership when it comes to virtual attendees voting on chapter resolutions.

“On one hand, I agree that we should have more government participation by the people. On the other hand, we don’t have the manpower to verify that virtual attendees are registered voters of the chapter,” she said.

The Council also addressed concerns regarding the Office of Navajo Government Development and the modification of Title 26. Delegate Otto Tso (Tó Nanees Dizi) said he would like to see more change come from the Office of Navajo Government Development.

“During my tenure on the Council, I haven’t seen one change come from that very office. However, we keep funding that department but see no results or fruition for the Navajo people,” he said. “What we are debating here in Council falls under the responsibility of the Office of Navajo Government Development. We need to act because chapter meetings are very important to conducting the business of the Navajo people.”

Delegate Carl R. Slater (Lukachukai, Rock Point, Round Rock, Tsaille/Wheatfields, Tsé Ch’ izhi) embraced the digital age, recognizing that shortfalls to chapter programs should not prohibit community involvement at the chapter government level.

He said the legislation promotes transparency and expanded participation for chapter members who want to be aware of what takes place at their local governments.

“For the people who are listening in and holding their leadership accountable, we shouldn’t be producing or encouraging roadblocks. We ought to afford the right to every Navajo citizen to participate in their government,” Delegate Slater said. “I’d like our youth and students to be able to call in to these meetings so they can exercise their right to participate in their government.”

The Council also passed an amendment proposed by Delegate Slater, permitting each chapter to decide by Chapter resolution or referendum, what type of attendance will be allowed at its

chapter meetings, either in-person or virtual. The amendment included that chapters must state, through Chapter resolution or referendum, how they will conduct official chapter business, either in-person or with virtual/hybrid participation and include policies and procedures for each type of attendance.

Legislation No. 0202-23 passed with a two-thirds vote with 15 in favor and 3 opposed. Once the resolution is certified and delivered to the Office of the President and Vice President, Navajo Nation President Dr. Buu Nygren will have ten calendar days to consider the resolution.

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