



Navajo Nation Council - Office of the Speaker

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Navajo Nation represented at Tribal Budget Advisory Council meeting in Washington, D.C.

WASHINGTON, D.C. – The Honorable Speaker Lawrence T. Morgan (Iyanbito/Pinedale) and a delegation of Navajo area representatives attended the Tribal Budget Advisory Council (TBAC) meeting on Dec. 2-4, 2007 in Washington, D.C.

The Navajo delegation included Council Delegate Hope MacDonald-Lonetree (Coalmine Canyon/Toh Nanees Dizi), Council Delegate Young Jeff Tom (Mariano Lake/Smith Lake), Navajo Nation Vice-President Ben Shelly, Arbin Mitchell – Community Development Director, and Omar Bradley – Regional Director for the BIA's Navajo Regional Office in Gallup, NM.

The quarterly meetings of the Tribal Budget Advisory Council are important to the Navajo Nation, because tribal representatives are updated on the federal budget from the Department of the Interior (DOI) and the Bureau of Indian Affairs (BIA). TBAC meetings give tribes a chance to create and work on budget proposals, budget development, and to set priorities for the upcoming federal budgeting process.

It is very important for tribes to keep tabs on the federal budget process and TBAC meetings provide these opportunities.

The Navajo Nation was particularly interested in knowing how much of the federal budget they will get and plans to mobilize with other Indian tribes to advocate for increased funding for all nations across the United States in the upcoming year, despite recent federal budget cuts to vitally needed programs for Indian Tribes.

The TBAC was attended by various tribal leaders from across the United States. The Tribal Budget Advisory Council was established in 1999 to help facilitate tribal government participation in the federal budgeting process. TBAC is comprised of two tribal representatives from each of the 12 BIA regions from throughout the United States.

The mission of TBAC is to provide an advisory government-to-government forum and process for tribes and the federal departments to develop budget requests. TBAC works within the confines of tribal sovereignty, treaty rights, self-governance, and self-determination.

Topics regarding public safety, law enforcement, healthcare, and education in Indian Country were highlighted in the meeting. The majority of meeting attendees agreed that everything needs to be tribally driven and not by the federal government.

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Speaker Morgan said that tribal governments need to take advantage of these meetings. "We need to see the results of what the federal government is doing out in Indian country and to remind them of our treaty obligations."

In an effort to work with federal agencies, American Indian leaders are seeking a collaborative effort with the Department of the Interior and the BIA.

In doing so, Tribal leaders voiced their concerns of the lack of true consultation with tribes by various federal agencies. Tribal leaders stressed the challenges associated with obligations of the federal government to live up to their responsibilities to Indian Nations.

The Federal government cut millions of dollars to Indian tribal programs in recent years, with billions being redirected to wars around the world.

At the meeting, TBAC members heard presentations regarding the Congressional Action of Fiscal Year (FY) 2008 and the status of the FY 2009 budget.

The TBAC was also briefed by the U.S. Department of the Interior (DOI) on matters related to funding requests by various tribes. The DOI also reported on the result and status of funding requests, the status of the Action List, they gave an update on the federal Office of Management and Budget (OMB) meeting, and they gave an update on the process of data management.

Brief reports on educational matters were given by Kevin Skenandore with the Dept. of Education and a presentation from the Tribal Caucus was given by Arturo Sinclair and Joe Garcia, leaders of the Tribal Budget Advisory Council.

Information regarding the Construction Recovery Plan was also presented to TBAC members, as well as briefings on the state of Indian Affairs facilities throughout Indian Country.

The National Congress of American Indian (NCAI) presented information regarding Tribal Provisions in Homeland Security as well.

It was explained that the Indian Self-Determination and Education Assistance Act, which was established in 1975, gives tribes a sense of self determination by using tribal sovereignty as leverage.

The Self-Determination Act has allowed tribes to determine their own decisions regarding federal dollars, but funding through the BIA continues to be a big problem and this problem is echoed throughout Indian Country.

Funding problems impact services geared towards tribal programs. Tribal programs continue to see a decrease in the quality of service rendered to its tribal members and the level of services is not up to par.

It was explained that Self Governance for Indian Nations is the key and this should be the first option for governance.

The funding formula for the BIA does not address the true needs of Indian country. The BIA funds administrative overhead at the BIA Central Office, the Regional offices, and the Agency offices. The majority of the funds should be used for direct services and funding better benefits for employees that deliver these services to the people.

The BIA continues to use the same funding formula, a formula that was established when BIA was first created. Tribal shares are usually consolidated in order to create critical mass to support administration of services. For this reason, self-governance efforts cannot be fully funded because of the Tribal shares concept.

Speaker Morgan explained that the Navajo Nation has sharply felt the pain of the continued budget cuts to vital programs that are desperately needed on the Navajo Nation.

“Our programs are suffering and are in need of improvements,” Speaker Morgan explained. “We cannot afford to have a disruption in the delivery of our services.”

Council Delegate Young Jeff Tom explained that the Navajo Nation has always taken a leadership role in the TBAC meetings and said that the Navajo Nation continues to advocate for increased funding for scholarships, education, social services, and tribal courts.

Tom continued by saying that in recent years, the federal Johnson O’Malley program has seen tremendous budget cuts that effect services to the Navajo Nation. The Johnson O’Malley program provides funding to school districts throughout the reservation.

Many tribal representatives echoed the same concerns regarding the federal budgeting process. The TBAC suggested that the BIA and the DOI define and facilitate an effective process for providing solutions to issues raised during the course of the meeting. Suggestions included a reorganization of the budgeting process, identifying, and implementing improvement efforts.

Carl Artman, head of the BIA, explained that his office is concentrated on how many dollars tribes will receive and how much money tribes will receive in the future. “This issue should be the pointed voice in our budgeting process.”

Meeting attendees raised the point that many times, tribes approach the federal government with mixed messages. The key is effective communication and the TBAC needs to all be on the same page in order to be as effective as possible.

“Tribal nations need to continue to make directives to the federal government,” Speaker Morgan explained. “We need to continue the dialogue with the federal government – this will hopefully result in better communication.”

Artman urged tribal leaders and federal employees that we all need to work together. “Tribes and Indian Affairs need to work together and we always need to be in communication. We can’t wait to talk every five or ten years, it needs to be all the time – we need to continue to improve and make things better.”

“Indian Tribes need to be in the driver’s seat,” Speaker Morgan said. “We are no longer going to be back seat drivers.”

“It does not make sense that our populations are growing, but our budget is not,” Speaker Morgan said. “We continue to submit our priorities year after year, but we are not being heard. As Native American leaders, it is our jobs to question the lack of funding to tribes,”

“Tribal Nations need to ban together and need to challenge the federal government to live up to its responsibilities by responding to our funding request,” Speaker Morgan added. “The proposed budget cuts are hurting our tribal programs, these programs are critical to the continued operation of various social services to Indian people – The Navajo Nation continues to feel the pain.”

“We need to be unified as tribal nations and approach the table with a consistent message,” Speaker Morgan said. “The Navajo Nation continues to see budget cuts across the board in education, school construction, tribal welfare assistance, community development, and economic development.”

Speaker Morgan added that “The Navajo Nation will continue to advocate for tribal programs and will continue to make noise regarding the federal budget process.”

Joe Garcia, President of the National Congress of American Indian (NCAI), said that “if this process is to be Indian driven, we need an Indian truck,” which received some applause and laughter from the crowd.

Artman added that “TBAC is very important to us – we are looking forward to keeping the relationship going strong.”

The Tribal Budget Advisory Council meeting is held quarterly and the last quarterly meeting was held in Polson, MT in March 2007.

A March 2008 meeting has been tentatively scheduled in Washington, D.C. The strategy for the 2010 budget will be discussed at that time, along with discussions pertaining to actions to advance the strategy for tribal advocacy.

TBAC plans to create a sub-committee that will be tasked as a work group that will be made up of tribal leaders and BIA employees. The sub-committee will negotiate concerns about the federal budget process.

TBAC would like to have representation from all regions and this committee will serve as a work group for the Tribal Budget Advisory Committee. The committee will be tasked with making recommendations to the main BIA and DOI offices.

“It’s very important that we get someone from the Navajo Nation on this committee,” MacDonald-Lonetree said. “It’s very important that we have Navajo representation.”

“I am happy to learn that tribal leaders from across the country have also identified public safety issues as a top priority for funding from the BIA,” MacDonald-Lonetree said. “As a tribal leader, we have our work cut out for us in the funding cycles and we need to focus on achievable goals in a field that is plagued by the lack of resources.”

Navajo Nation Vice-President Ben Shelly told fellow TBAC members that “Our efforts need to be a partnership. This is certainly a start and we need to implement this process as soon as possible.”