



The 21st Navajo Nation Council

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FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE

Council Delegate Katherine Benally and Dennehotso community members lobby congressional leaders for new Dennehotso Boarding School

WASHINGTON DC – In an effort to obtain answers and congressional support for the construction of a new Dennehotso Boarding School, Council Delegate Katherine Benally and her constituents traveled to the nation's capitol to lobby congressional leaders from the state of Arizona.

Benally's delegation, which consisted of elders, school board members, parents, concerned community members and the Navajo Nation Washington Office, met with Rep. Ann Kirkpatrick and legislative staffers from Sen. Byron L. Dorgan's, Sen. Jon Kyl's and Sen. John McCain's offices in an effort to pressure the Bureau of Indian Affairs (BIA) and Bureau of Indian Education's (BIE) Office of Facilities Management and Construction (OFMC) for a new school in Dennehotso, Ariz.

Money has been earmarked for the new school but the location of the facility and lack of community input on the design, planning and construction of the facility are key issues that have not been resolved.

Based on their own feasibility study, the BIA and BIE claim the existing school site is most suitable to their cost-effective needs because water and electricity are available through the existing school, which is a site not culturally appropriate and feasible according to the community.

At the existing school site, which is in total dilapidation, there is the recurrent problem of reptiles, particularly snakes slithering around the area. Community members said the old school is constructed over a snake pit and children are in close contact with snakes.

"In our culture and belief, we cannot live where snakes live," explained Lillian Begay, one of three elders of the delegation and foster grandparent at the boarding school. "The snakes come out all the time. BIA and BIE do not see it as an issue and are not culturally sensitive."

In addition to the reptile issue, other issues of concern include the existence of a natural gas line on the existing site, a sewer lagoon's leakage of waste into a nearby arroyo, which floods the campus. The school's carpet also smells of mildew as a result of the heavy flooding. Cold drafts of air and dust from poor ventilation often causes students to suffer from allergies, asthma and colds among other sicknesses.

"The windows are in such poor condition. In the winter time, the cold draft comes in causing our kids to get sick," added Alice Mitchell, a foster grandparent at the school. "The school and campus overall is in deteriorating condition."

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The delegation also informed congressional leaders of their plan to enter into a P.L. 93-638 contract for planning, design and construction of the Dennehotso Boarding School to better accommodate the community's needs.

"The community is asking to be part of the plan for construction and design," Benally said. "We can certainly build this school much sooner than BIA would. They have not consulted with us on any design; they have not consulted with us on any matters."

Through the '638 process, the Navajo Division of Community Development's Design and Engineering Services would administer and carry out the proposed contract.

In response to the community's lobbying efforts, Kirkpatrick said she couldn't believe BIE had not maintained the school and thanked the delegation for their hard work.

"The BIE has the responsibility to keep these buildings maintained over the years," Kirkpatrick explained. "Now, we are at the point where these buildings can't be repaired but replaced. I can't believe they have allowed that to happen, I really can't."

"Thank you all for your hard work and service to be here," added Kirkpatrick.

"We hope to get congressional support for getting our funds through the Navajo Nation because at this point we lost trust and confidence in BIA and BIE's OFMC to proceed with our replacement school," Benally added. "We hope all the congressional people we visited heard us, and listened to us and support us to have funds given to the Navajo Nation."

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