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## **Resources and Development Committee’s “Nation Building Summit” draws large attendance, Diné people stress importance of long-term planning**

TSAILE, Ariz. – Over the course of three days, nearly 300 people from across the Navajo Nation arrived here daily from August 22-24, to outline what they viewed as priority needs for infrastructure and development within their communities. This dialogue was a part of the “Nation Building Summit,” which was the first of its kind hosted by the Resources and Development Committee and Diné College.

The second part of the summit’s discussion centered on whether the infrastructural projects participants identified should be funded by a percentage of the principal from the Navajo Permanent Trust Fund – and if so, how much money should be withdrawn?

“You, the people, will guide us. That is the purpose of this summit” said Council Delegate Katherine Benally in her welcoming remarks on the second day of the summit.

It is pivotal to have these types of frank discussions, said Delegate Benally, where the people ask each other, as well as their leaders, how they will plan to meet the needs of future generations and how they will foster prosperous community growth across the nation.

Summit participants heard from a diverse group of speakers that included a number of former Navajo leaders as well as up-and-coming young Navajo leaders. All provided their perspectives on responsible planning, development, and community restoration efforts.

### **What is Nation Building?**

Each day began with a morning and evening general session. In between, summit attendees divided into various breakout sessions, fifteen in total, depending on their interest topic.

Some of these topics focused on women, elders, youth, veterans, housing, workforce development, transportation, utilities, banking, and natural resources – to name a few.

In these sessions, participants defined what ‘nation building’ meant to them. For some, it meant constructing new facilities, building access to better telecommunication services, or streamlining the Navajo government by eliminating duplication of services.

The breakout session group for women and women issues believed that nation building begins in the home. It should begin with creating better representation within local and nationwide government levels to find solutions for the many social issues Navajo women endure.

Janene Yazzie, who represented the voice of the youth stated in her luncheon speech that a strong nation was about having access to good food, clean water, building homes that promote healing, and empowering people to take ownership of their communities in a harmonious way.

“We don’t need money to build some of these things,” Yazzie said.

In most of the summit discussions, long-term planning was identified as being an essential part of the equation for community building.

Speaker Johnny Naize emphasized how vital it is for Navajo chapters to develop and finalize their land-use plans as one of the first steps for nation building.

“Having a certified land-use plan in place prevents time-consuming disputes and delays from occurring,” Speaker Naize said. With a solid land-use plan, community projects can follow through to completion in a timely manner, which is also a cost-effective measure.

Speaker Naize also encouraged collaborative efforts between chapter officials and council delegates, as well as their local government support center (LGSC) to move the nation forward on community development projects.

“We’re very near-sighted as a nation. We rely on the quick-fix,” said Kimberly Silentman-Kanuho, who grew up in Fort Defiance, Ariz., and is currently a planner with Swaback Partners, a prestigious architectural design and community planning firm in Scottsdale, Ariz.

Silentman-Kanuho underscored the value of thorough planning and that with such, tribal leaders and community planners had the ability to create jobs on the nation based on how they strategically placed housing subdivisions, schools, and commercial development within a community.

She continued to ask a question that many others at the summit echoed, “How will our decision today affect future generations?”

In his speech, former Navajo Chairman Peterson Zah advised summit attendees to plan in the best interests of yet-to-be born generations and think like mothers and fathers, and again as grandmothers and grandfathers.

“My word to you is to be cautious,” Zah said, referencing the question of whether to draw principal funds from the permanent trust fund to pay for infrastructural projects.

Delegate Benally acknowledged that her committee had expected that some Diné citizens would voice opposition to the use of the PTF principal, “and we respect that,” she said.

This summit was a means to hear directly from the people on issues affecting the nation’s future that are both multi-faceted and intricate, but are nevertheless issues that need to be confronted and addressed, Delegate Benally noted.

### **Permanent Trust Fund: To Use or Not to Use?**

On the final day of the summit, the facilitators of each breakout session reported their recommendations back to the general assembly and issued their thoughts on whether to draw from the PTF to fund community development projects.

A majority of the groups believed that a small and limited portion of the PTF should be used, but the funds should be used strictly for planning purposes.

While each group listed the type of community development projects and services they would like to eventually see funded, the majority declared that in order to build long-lasting benefits for the people, these projects needed to be planned thoroughly first.

The people stated that as an example, withdrawn PTF funds could be used to pay for costly feasibility studies, environmental assessments, and archeological clearances – all steps that are vital to planning a solid and secure project.

### **Summit Report To Determine Next Steps**

According to the committee, a report is scheduled to be developed by a consultant that will be inclusive of all the comments, concerns, and suggestions received by the people during the summit. It will summarize the people's position on nation building and possible use of the PTF.

"We, the Resources and Development Committee, will follow through on the majority of the people's wishes, said Delegate Benally, referring to what the report findings may conclude.

"If the people want vote on this, and request for us to put this on an election ballot as a referendum question asking if a portion of the Permanent Trust Fund should be used to develop our nation, we will do that.

And if they decide that the permanent trust fund principal should remain untouched, we will respect their wishes and comply with that, too," Delegate Benally stated.

The Nation Building Summit was the second public discussion event that the committee organized in recent months.

The RDC had hosted a similar successful public gathering last month, strategizing with over 300 Diné people and producing solutions to chip away at the nation's looming problem with high numbers of feral livestock and overgrazing.

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