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Resources and Development Committee listens to Bodaway/Gap Chapter group supporting development of Grand Canyon Escalade project

ST. MICHAELS, Ariz. – As a testament to fairness and equity, the Resources and Development Committee listened to a presentation from developers and a group of citizens from Bodaway/Gap Chapter touting the benefits of developing the proposed Grand Canyon Escalade project.

Last month, the committee accepted a report from a separate group of citizens from Bodaway/Gap Chapter that were in opposition to the project's construction, primarily because of its proximity to the confluence of the Colorado and Little Colorado Rivers, a sacred site used for prayer offerings.

Shortly after that report, Council Delegate Katherine Benally (Chilchinbeto, Kayenta, Dennehotso) cited that it was only fair to hear what the projects supporters had to say.

The presentation in support of the project's construction was led by Albert Hale, former Arizona state senator and former Navajo Nation president, now a partner and legal advisor with Confluence Partners', LLC, the developers behind the estimated \$200 million tourist destination project.

In his presentation, Hale identified project details, project economics, and its current status, followed by an outline of what the next steps are for advancing the project.

The project site, which will be located west of Tuba City and southwest of Bodaway/Gap, is designed to include hotel lodges, specialty retail stores, an RV park, facilities for artists to vend their crafts, restaurants and cafes, a general store, a cultural center and museum, and a tram station connected to gondolas that will carry tourists down to a riverwalk near the bottom of the canyon.

According to plan details, the Confluence Partners will primarily develop and manage the project under an operating and development agreement with the Navajo Nation.

The developers are responsible for raising the \$120 million in private investment funds that are needed to help pay for onsite construction activities.

The Navajo Nation, however, will be asked to contribute up to \$60 million," said Hale, "which will be used to construct roads and utilities to the site."

Hale argued that since the Nation is "obligated" to extend and improve roads and utilities for residents in these areas, it would eventually need to spend millions of dollars in the future anyway to fulfill the need for these infrastructural development and improvement projects.

A group of about 30 supporters from the Bodaway/Gap Chapter underscored the importance of the project to bring much needed economic development to the area, which for four decades had been impacted by no-build restrictions imposed under the Bennett Freeze, lifted in 2006.

The development would bring jobs that would enable Navajo family members to stay home on the reservation to provide for their families and remain in a setting to maintain cultural identity and knowledge of the Navajo language, the group said.

“I’m not against the project. This committee is pro-economic development,” said Council Delegate Leonard Tsosie (Baca/Prewitt, Casamero Lake, Counselor, Littlewater, Ojo Encino, Pueblo Pintado, Torreon, Whitehorse Lake), who clarified that the questions and concerns posed by the committee is reflective of the cautious and “harmonious” manner in which the committee is trying to approach the issue.

“One thing that worries me is that [the groups are] beginning to approach this committee separately. Last time we had the other group, and now we have the pro-group,” Delegate Tsosie added.

Delegates Benally and Tsosie both urged the supporting group to work with members of the opposing group, as well as the Navajo Medicine Men’s Association, to mediate and address the concerns of both parties.

The association had passed a resolution opposing the project.

The division within the community of Bodaway/Gap was unsettling and worrisome for Delegate Tsosie, who stated that the negligence of the teaching of k’é was not “the Navajo way.”

If mediation discussions do not prove fruitful, the committee suggested another solution – that perhaps the issue will have to go up for a chapter referendum vote.

Whichever avenue of solution, the committee stressed to all parties to interact respectfully with one another and to move toward a harmonious position that will benefit all individuals and families involved.

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