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February 5, 2013

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Navajo Nation Council approves supplemental funding for Navajo Election Administration to meet elections needs of the Navajo Nation

WINDOW ROCK – In a decision aimed at affording and protecting the Navajo people’s right to vote, the 22nd Navajo Nation Council on the Jan. 30 – the final day of the Winter Council Session – approved supplemental funding from the Unreserved, Undesignated Fund Balance account in the amount of \$416,552 and \$281,476 to the Navajo Election Administration.

With the approved supplemental funding, the NEA can fund the conduction of special elections and provide election assistance and public educational information related to elections matters on the Navajo Nation.

The resolution, which included three amendments, passed with a final vote of 16 in favor and 4 opposing, but not without considerable debate.

Legislation No. 0431-12 was first heard by the Council on Jan. 29, but was tabled until the following day so Navajo Election Administration officials and legislation sponsors, Council Delegates Danny Simpson (Becenti, Crownpoint, Huerfano, Lake Valley, Nageezi, Nahodishgish, Tsé ii’ahi, Whiterock) and Jonathan Nez (Shonto, Navajo Mountain, Oljato, Ts’ah Bii Kin), could revise the proposed budget to meet the NEA’s area of need.

Immediately after the legislation was recalled to be put back on the Council agenda on Jan. 30, council delegates engaged in a multi-faceted discussion which fringed on the topics of fiscal responsibility, prevention of wasteful spending, preservation of voting rights, and ideas to revamp how elections are conducted on the Navajo Nation.

In her comments, Council Delegate Katherine Benally (Chilchinbeto, Dennehotso, Kayenta) addressed fellow Council colleagues, particularly Council Delegate Leonard Tsosie (Baca/Prewitt, Casamero Lake, Counselor, Littlewater, Ojo Encino, Pueblo Pintado, Torreon, Whitehorse Lake), who felt that the approval of the supplemental funding encouraged wasteful spending, and that special elections could be administered within the Navajo Election Administration’s original budget.

“For those chapters that have filled all elected positions, you may feel that there is no need for an election. Unfortunately, that is not the case across the Nation,” said Delegate Benally. “There are a lot of elected positions still vacant, and the law says there has to be special elections held.”

Delegate Benally continued on the point of protecting voting rights, “If we really care about the people, this is a basic fundamental right that we’re trying to protect – making sure they vote. So, we’re not going to be wasting our money.”

“The issue is about trying to be fiscally responsible and provide voting rights,” said Council Delegate Dwight Witherspoon (Black Mesa, Forest Lake, Hardrock, Pinon, Whippoorwill), who voiced concern over elections that still had to be held in which there is only one candidate running.

“It seems to be a waste,” said Delegate Witherspoon. “I discussed with [NEA Executive Director] Mr. Edison Wauneka that we need to bring forth legislation to change the law to allow for the appointment of individuals when there is only one candidate in these elections.”

However, Delegate Witherspoon acknowledged that this sort of action would only occur during general elections so as not to discourage voter turn-out during primary elections, which is when voter participation should especially be encouraged. Delegate Witherspoon stated that he would continue to fine-tune the idea with the NEA leadership.

As of Jan. 25, the amount available for appropriation in the Undesignated, Unreserved Fund Balance account sits at approximately \$25.8 Million, according to the Office of the Controller.

The last two supplemental appropriations that gained approval by the Council occurred during its Fall Council Session last year.

Then, Council approved \$750,000 to fund an investment analysis into whether the Nation could proceed with the acquisition of the BHP Navajo Coal Company, and just over \$625,000 in supplemental funding for the Navajo Veterinary and Livestock Program to carry out emergency response and prevention measures against Rocky Mountain Spotted Fever.

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