



23RD NAVAJO NATION COUNCIL OFFICE OF THE SPEAKER

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MEDIA CONTACTS

Jared Touchin (928) 221-9253

Jolene Holgate (928) 380-4174

Crystalayne Curley (928) 286-7918

nnlb.communications@gmail.com

Health, Education, and Human Services Committee receive report regarding housing proposal for residents in Former Bennett Freeze Area

TONALEA, Ariz. – Last Tuesday, the Health, Education, and Human Services Committee met with members from the Tonalea Community Development Committee who presented a report regarding a pilot project to construct homes in the area for residents that were impacted by the Former Bennett Freeze. TCDC is a subcommittee of the Tonalea Chapter.

According to the report, TCDC chair Cindy S. Covey said they developed a housing proposal which outlines a plan to construct 500 homes in a span of five years, and the group hopes to have it added to the Navajo Nation's Five-Year Plan as a priority to provide housing to FBFA residents.

Covey said the Navajo Nation Office of the President and Vice President reviewed the proposal and suggested that the TCDC implement a pilot project to ensure the homes being built are up to standard and are suitable for families. She added that the OPVP would aid in obtaining \$500,000 for the pilot project in addition to \$100,000 that Tonalea Chapter would need to contribute.

HEHSC member Council Delegate Amber Kanazbah Crotty (Beclabito, Cove, Gadi'i'áhi/To'Koi, Red Valley, Tooh Haltsooi, Toadlena/Two Grey Hills, Tsé ałnáoz't'í) commended the TCDC for gathering data from the community and developing the housing proposal within seven months.

"I can't believe what this community has completed in seven months that the Navajo Nation has not done in the last seven years. You have the full support of our committee who are committed to your endeavors, and we want to tell you that you are not forgotten," said Delegate Crotty.

Delegate Crotty also urged that Law and Order Committee to visit the community of Tonalea to see the crime that has impacted FBFA residents and said the freeze was an unjust move by the federal government that left Navajo people in unlivable and unsanitary conditions, adding that it is a social justice issue that the Navajo Nation will need to address.

In 1966, commissioner of the Bureau of Indian Affairs Robert Bennett ceased development of approximately 1.6 million acres of land that was in dispute by the Navajo Nation and Hopi Tribe, which prohibited Navajo families from making any improvements to their homes or to construct new homes in the area for nearly 50 years.

Decades later, Congress passed the Navajo-Hopi Settlement Act and in 2009 President Obama officially lifted the freeze on development in the area, allowing for residents to begin constructing and rehabilitating homes and facilities.

Covey said that the homes being constructed would be cost-efficient and sustainable, which would be provided by a company called Green Place, Ltd.

EHSC chair Council Delegate Jonathan Hale (Oak Springs, St. Michaels) said he did not see any background information on Green Place, Ltd. and recommended to the TCDC that due diligence be carried out to assess liability.

“As a precautionary measure, it would be in the best interest to do a background check and due diligence on the company. In the past, the Navajo Nation has dealt with liability and financial issues with companies that were not vetted through the due diligence process and we want to ensure the best for our Navajo people,” said Delegate Hale.

He added that the housing plan also be reviewed by the required departments that would regularly view proposals to ensure that it would meet all necessary criteria to begin construction if the plan is approved by the Navajo Nation Council.

Council Delegate Tuchoney Slim, Jr. (Bodaway/Gap, Coppermine, K’ai’Bii’Tó, LeChee, Tonalea/Red Lake), who represents the community, said he would sponsor legislation to allocate \$500,000 to the pilot project from the Unreserved, Undesignated Fund Balance.

“The community has waited long enough to begin rehabilitating their homes and land. The community developed this proposal and as leaders, we are very appreciative of their efforts,” said Delegate Slim. “We must empower our people and send the message to them that they can accomplish these projects if they put their hearts, minds, and determination to carry out the wishes of their communities.”

At the conclusion of the discussion, EHSC members were invited to tour the residents’ homes who reside in the FBFA, in which many structures are dilapidated, unsafe, and unsanitary.

Council Delegates Nelson BeGaye (Lukachukai, Rock Point, Round Rock, Tsaille/Wheatfields, Tsé Ch’ izhí) and Otto Tso (Tó Nanees Dizi) were also in attendance for the meeting and housing tour.

EHSC members voted 3-0 to accept the report.

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