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Speaker Bates meets with concerned community members and power plant workers to discuss the future of Navajo Generating Station

FOREST LAKE, Ariz. – On Wednesday, Speaker LoRenzo Bates was scheduled to meet with federal and tribal officials to discuss the potential closure of Navajo Generating Station, but instead accepted an invitation to meet with local residents at Forest Lake Chapter to provide information and to address their questions and concerns regarding NGS and the potential impact on Kayenta Mine.



PHOTO: Speaker LoRenzo Bates discusses Navajo Generating Station and Kayenta Mine with local residents at Forest Lake Chapter on April 5, 2017.

Following the meeting with local residents, Speaker Bates traveled to the city of Page where he met with NGS workers.

Speaker Bates provided both groups with information regarding the Navajo Nation's projected revenues for next year's budget, which indicates that the Nation will likely have a revenue shortfall next fiscal year due to declining coal and oil prices that provide for a large portion of the comprehensive budget each year. If NGS were to discontinue operations this year, the Nation could be facing an even larger budget shortfall, added Speaker Bates.

In addition, the Trump administration's initial "skinny budget" also indicates that the Navajo Nation would receive less federal funding, which would add to the overall budget shortfall.

"These are not scare tactics, this is the reality of the situation," stated Speaker Bates. "There are many moving pieces that need to be considered and factored into the situation that NGS is in."

Approximately 40-community members were in attendance at Forest Lake Chapter, many of which reside near Kayenta Mine in the community of Black Mesa. Over the four-hour meeting, a total of 13 individuals were provided the opportunity to address their concerns, which ranged from the impacts on health from dust and coal ash, potential contamination of water sources, health and safety of livestock, and the need for the Navajo Nation to pursue more renewable energy development.

The majority of those who spoke at the meeting urged tribal leaders to close Kayenta Mine and to hold Peabody Coal Co. accountable for fully reclaiming the lands. They also urged leadership to pursue renewable energy development such as wind and solar energy, adding that Forest Lake Chapter currently uses solar energy, which is not only a clean source of energy but has reduced the cost of providing electricity at the facility.

Two audience members refuted claims of health impacts due to coal mining, stating that they were employed at Kayenta Mine for several decades as coal miners and have not experienced any health problems since retiring.

Several community members said local “grassroots” people should have a “seat at the table” when the Navajo Nation is discussing potential options with the owners of NGS. Additionally, they asked leaders to support them in participating in the development of renewable energy initiatives with Navajo Transitional Energy Company.

NTEC is the owner of Navajo Mine located in New Mexico. When the Navajo Nation Council formed NTEC in 2013 in order to purchase Navajo Mine, the enabling legislation mandated that the company use 10-percent of its annual net income to pursue renewable energy development.

The community members requested to provide a report to the Council to share their concerns prior to Council considering an extension or renewal of the NGS lease.

Speaker Bates informed the group that the Navajo Nation must reach a decision on the NGS lease no later than July 1, 2017 if the Nation wants to extend or renew the lease to allow the company to continue operating through 2019. He added that he expects legislation to be introduced beginning on May 1 to address the NGS lease.

“Every day the situation is changing and its very complex,” said Speaker Bates. “Everything that we heard today is important and should be considered when looking at the big picture.”

Following the meeting at Forest Lake Chapter, Speaker Bates and Council Delegate Nathaniel Brown met with approximately 60 NGS workers in the city of Page. Many of the employees that spoke asked for the Council and the President to support the continuation of NGS through 2019 and beyond.

Several employees said NGS has provided stability for them and their families by allowing them to stay close to their families rather than having to leave the Navajo Nation to find employment.

Coppermine Chapter president Sid Whitehair urged the employees to become more involved and to continue obtaining supporting resolutions from chapters and to submit them to Navajo

leadership. Another employee said that he fears that if the power plant closes, it will lead some to substance abuse and create more social problems in surrounding communities.

One audience member who identified herself as a social worker with the state of Arizona, asked the Council to support the workers, adding that the state has already experienced a decline in funding for social workers and that a closure of NGS would lead to more social problems in Navajo communities.

Speaker Bates informed both groups that he and the President would be meeting with the U.S. Department of the Interior and other stakeholders on April 12, to follow-up on their previous meeting, which was held on March 1.

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