



23RD NAVAJO NATION COUNCIL OFFICE OF THE SPEAKER

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Council supports funding for pilot project to construct homes in the Former Bennett Freeze Area

WINDOW ROCK – On the third day of the 2017 Winter Council Session, the Navajo Nation Council approved Legislation No. 0001-17, which would provide approximately \$255,000 from the Unreserved, Undesignated Fund Balance to carry out a pilot project that would construct 10 homes in the Former Bennett Freeze Area, if signed into law by President Russell Begaye.

Legislation sponsor Council Delegate Tuchoney Slim, Jr. (Bodaway/Gap, Coppermine, K'ai'biit'ó, LeChee, Tonalea/Red Lake), along with the Tonalea Community Development Committee and representatives from the Tonalea Chapter, presented a proposal outlining a proposed project that would begin housing construction in the FBFA.

“We have spent a lot of time planning on how we can get our leaders to begin helping with the Former Bennett Freeze Area. It is our goal to bring our people back and change the life of the children in that area,” said Delegate Slim. “For far too long our people have suffered in that area and they have been waiting patiently for the Navajo Nation to help them.”

Delegate Slim stressed that constructing the houses would encourage Navajo people to return home to their community and begin increasing economic development.

Cindy S. Covey, TCDC chair, said the community has worked for over a year on the proposal to provide new homes to FBFA residents who reside in unsafe, dilapidated homes, and urged Council to support the legislation because it would “return dignity back to the community members.”

“This project is so important to our Navajo people in the FBFA—it’s an emotional issue. I want the 23rd Navajo Nation Council to go down in history as the leaders that changed the lives for the people in this area,” said Covey.

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.

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

The legislation initially sought \$543,000, however, Council Delegate Dwight Witherspoon (Black Mesa, Forest Lake, Hardrock, Pinon, Whippoorwill) informed Council that 65-percent of the project's funding would come from the chapter and other outside sources, and that Council would only need to fund the difference.

He then proposed an amendment to reduce the amount from \$543,000 to \$255,000. Council members voted 15-3 to approve the amendment.

Council Delegate Tom Chee (Shiprock) commended the TCDC and chapter for developing a comprehensive proposal that illustrates that the community is eager to move forward with their own solutions.

"They took the initiative upon themselves and said 'this is how it should be done.' There is nothing like building your own home, creating your own cornfield, and nothing like educating yourself out of your own pocket. That is the best thing you can give to the next generation—to be a self-supporting individual," said Delegate Chee.

Covey said one of the primary purposes is to ensure that the homes being built are up to standard and are suitable for families. The proposal states that if the project proves successful, TCDC would seek to begin constructing nearly 450 additional homes throughout the FBFA.

Council Delegate Leonard Tsosie (Baca/Prewitt, Casamero Lake, Counselor, Littlewater, Ojo Encino, Pueblo Pintado, Torreon, Whitehorse Lake) said he supported the housing initiative, but cautioned his Council colleagues in using the UUFB rather than holding the Navajo Housing Authority accountable for addressing housing needs.

"[The NHA], that is where the money is if you want to help this group of people. Yet we are getting the Navajo Nation in trouble and we're leaving NHA alone. The answer is to take the [Tribally Designated Housing Entity] back from them, redo the Indian housing plan, and give them their full funding. That's holding NHA accountable," said Delegate Tsosie.

Council members voted 16-2 to approve Legislation No. 0001-17 with one amendment. President Russell Begaye will have 10 calendar days to consider the resolution once it is sent to the Office of the President and Vice President.

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