



Budget & Finance Committee Mum on Navajo Nation Smoking Ban Bill

*Committee also hears report from the three branch chiefs meeting
regarding the tribal budget*

Window Rock, AZ – After hearing a report from executives from Navajo Gaming Enterprise on the negative impacts a ban on smoking in public buildings on the Navajo Nation, including casinos, would have on gaming revenues and threaten the construction of the Twin Arrows complex in Arizona, the Budget & Finance Committee on Tuesday took no action on the bill that would have proposed a compromise and allow smoking in casinos.

Legislation No. 0240-11, the Smoke-free Navajo Nation Act of 2011, sponsored by Council Delegate Elmer P. Begay (Dilcon, Indian Wells, Teesto, Whitecone, Greasewood Springs), allows smoking to continue in gaming facilities on the Navajo Nation while instituting the ban elsewhere.

Last month, Navajo Nation President Ben Shelly issued an executive order banning all smoking in public buildings, including casinos, that was quickly rescinded in favor for more public input.

“We are not against a Navajo Nation smoking ban,” said Navajo Gaming Enterprise CEO Robert Winters. “What we are against is the prospect of being the only Indian casinos in New Mexico, and eventually Arizona, required to be smoke-free. Our loss in revenue to other gaming facilities will threaten jobs and investments the Navajo Nation has already made.”

“It would also prevent the Twin Arrows Resort construction from going forward,” warned Winters.

However, Winters also reported that the Gaming Enterprise was initializing a dialog with other Arizona casino tribes to see if they would be willing to become smoke-free, thus leveling the field regarding patrons that smoke.

After the presentation and after a suspension of the rules was approved, Budget & Finance Committee Chairperson LoRenzo Bates (T'iistoh Sikaad, Nenahnezad, Upper Fruitland, Tse' Daa' Kaan, Newcomb, San Juan) asked for a first and second motion to consider the bill.

When it failed to gain a second motion to begin a committee discussion and a formal vote, the bill moved forward with no committee action and was later considered by the Resources & Development Committee where it passed 4-0.

Health, Education & Human Services, and the Law & Order Committees are expected to take consideration of the bill soon.

After the vote, the Budget & Finance Committee heard from the three branch chiefs regarding their recent recommendations on how to split the proposed FY2012 tribal operating budget.

Navajo Nation Council Speaker Johnny Naize reiterated his call to increase the budget for the Legislative Branch in order to accommodate the increased workload the 24 Council Delegates have incorporated since the Council was reduced from 88 delegates.

“Although some thought a smaller Council would mean a smaller budget, the opposite has happened. The increase in Chapter representation has led to an increase of meeting and on-reservation travel expenses,” continued Naize. “We need to make sure we don’t lose the voice of the people because we have to ration the Delegates ability to serve community needs and concerns.”

After several committee members voiced concerns that more money needed to be provided for the chapters and perhaps not enough direction was given to the branch chiefs to formulate their agreement, Chairman Bates reminded the members that the agreement is just a report and that the committee will take the branch chiefs recommendations in consideration. However, he did tell the committee that because of the length of time it took to reorganize the Legislative Branch, “time is of the essence” to build and submit the FY2012 tribal operating budget.

The committee accepted the report 4-1.

Bates said he expects formal legislation on the FY2012 tribal operating budget to be submitted by the end of the week.

Additional actions from the committee included approving excess FY 2010 carryover funds for the Navajo Nation Washington Office, the Navajo Office of Labor Relations, Office of the Attorney General and the Division of General Services. The committee also approved acceptance of grants or contracts from the US Bureau of Indian Education, Bureau of Indian Affairs, and the US Department of Agriculture for Rural Development.

The Budget & Finance Committee serves as oversight for the Navajo Nation Division of Finance and coordinates, oversees, and regulates the fiscal, financial, investment, contracting and auditing polices of the Navajo Nation. This standing committee is also tasked with reviewing the annual budgets of the Bureau of Indian Affairs, the Indian Health Service and other departments and agencies of the federal government.