



The 22nd Navajo Nation Council — Office of the Speaker

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May 10, 2011

FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE

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Speaker Johnny Naize and Navajo Nation Council Delegates Celebrate Hwy 491 Groundbreaking

Segment part of Hwy 491 widening from Tohatchi to Shiprock

Newcomb, NM — Navajo Nation Council Speaker Johnny Naize, with Council Delegates Mel R. Begay (Coyote Canyon, Mexican Springs, Naschitti, Tohatchi, Bahast'l'a'a') and Katherine Benally (Chilchinbeto, Dennehotso, Kayenta), along with New Mexico leaders such as State Senator John Pinto (District 3-D), and representatives from the federal government, celebrated last week at the groundbreaking for the another four-lane segment of U.S. Highway 491.

“From the beginning, the entire Highway 491 expansion needed the cooperation of the Navajo Nation and the State of New Mexico,” said Speaker Naize. “First, we struggled with clearance issues then we worked through concerns regarding procurement, tax, and the use of Navajo employment preference so that our local workforce would be used.”

“Now construction begins, thanks to the help of the Council’s former Transportation and Community Development Committee under the Chairmanship of Sampson Begay. It was their efforts to arrange the \$8 million of ARRA (American Recovery and Reinvestment Act) funds and \$36 million from a TIGER (Transportation Investment Generating Economic Recovery) grant to begin this segment,” continued Naize.

The Speaker further indicated his intention to keep those who use and live along the highway safe.



From left: Council Delegate Mel R. Begay, Speaker Johnny Naize, Former Council Delegate Leonard Chee, Council Delegate Katherine Benally

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“When this Highway is completed, we will do our best to make sure it is not used for the transportation of illegal drugs or toxic chemicals such as radioactive material. I also expect the general contractor to provide safe turnouts for business along Highway 491. The Navajo Nation cares about the safety of its people, the communities and tourists.”

A group of school children from nearby Newcomb looked on as officials turned the earth before bigger land movers and shakers plow through the landscape. The wider highway would make it safer for school children who ride school buses that navigate the narrow shoulders and speeding traffic to pick up and drop off their passengers.

“The expansion of Highway 491 not only makes for a smoother trip between Shiprock and Gallup, it also reduces the dangers posed to the communities and people who live along the road,” said Delegate Mel R. Begay. “We want to end the carnage and sorrow caused from head on collisions and other accidents.”

The Chairperson of the Resources and Infrastructure Subcommittee, Katherine Benally, commended and appreciated the work done by her group and those who helped with obtaining ARRA funds for the widening of Highway 491.

“Our top concern regarding this road is safety – the safety of all who travel this highway. By making it a four-lane (highway), I see our elders traveling at their own speed safely. We must extend our appreciation to President Obama, for it was his ARRA stimulus plan funds that finally addressed the next leg of widening Highway 491. Unfortunately, the US economy had to experience a bust in order for these funds to exist, but nevertheless, we give thanks to Obama and Governor Richardson.”

“Overall, road construction and improvement is a top priority for the Subcommittee and we emphasize that whenever we visit our state and federal lawmakers,” continued Benally. “And we will continue to work with our counterparts here and in Washington, DC, to make sure the Navajo Nation gets the road and highway money it needs.”

Highway 491 serves as the major route that funnels traffic through the Navajo Nation and San Juan and McKinley Counties. It is also the corridor that links Interstate 40 to the Four Corners region, and besides serving communities it is also important economically for the area. Work began in 2005 in a series of phases to expand the two-lane highway to four lanes from Tohatchi to Shiprock, New Mexico.

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