

Naa'bik'iyati' Committee approves NDOT-FHWA direct funding agreement



Council delegates Jonathan Nez (Navajo Mountain, Oljato, Shoto, Tsah Bii Kin) and Roscoe Smith (Crystal, Ft. Defiance, Red Lake, Sawmill) co-sponsored Legislation No. 0383-12, which is regarding a direct funding agreement between Navajo Division of Transportation and the Federal Highway Administration. NDOT Director Paulson Chaco said the division has been working on passage of the legislation for over a year now. (Photo by Rick Abasta)

WINDOW ROCK-By a vote of 16-0, the Naa'bik'iyati' Committee of the 22nd Navajo Nation Council approved the direct funding agreement between Navajo Division of Transportation and the Federal Highway Administration on Dec. 6.

Council delegate Roscoe Smith (Crystal, Ft. Defiance, Red Lake, Sawmill) co-sponsored Legislation No. 0383-12 along with fellow delegate Jonathan Nez (Navajo Mountain, Oljato, Shoto, Tsah Bii Kin).

Smith said NDOT is moving forward as a division and taking over responsibilities formally entrusted to the Bureau of Indian Affairs. The agreement provides FY 2013 revenue amounting to \$10 million for NDOT and \$44 million for the BIA.

"This \$10 million represents

the preliminary part of any road construction," Smith said. "Eventually, by way of projects, NDOT will develop the capacity to enter into the next phase to take over greater responsibilities."

Smith reported the biggest concern from most people was the BIA's control schedule for road projects, which was stretched out into a 40-year plan.

"For some of the chapters in the area expecting services concerning roads, (the timeframe) is almost unrealistic," he said.

Through the direct funding agreement, the Navajo Nation and BIA would collaborate on prioritizing projects and budgeting funding to pay for those costs.

Smith said the Navajo Nation was never before given that kind

of opportunity and that the BIA was opening the door for future collaborations based on the success of the agreement with NDOT.

His co-sponsoring colleague echoed similar sentiments.

Nez said, "In regard to this legislation brought forth to you today, it is an exercise in self-governance. I think this is a model we could utilize as well, to allow direct funding to come into divisions and departments."

He said concerns with the current BIA process are primarily about the protracted process from planning to construction.

"I think with the approval of this legislation, we will expedite a lot more action and not just at the central level," Nez said.

Nez reminded delegates about NDOT's meetings and

efforts with regionalizing transportation plans at the chapter level, and said NDOT's vision of granting decision-making authority to regional transportation centers will save people a trip to Window Rock to request for services.

Other opportunities are also available from the direct funding agreement.

"We also have an opportunity to make interest off these funds that come into the Navajo Nation through an interest-bearing bank account," Nez said.

NDOT Director Paulson Chaco said the agreement was unique to the Navajo Nation because no other federally-funded program in the tribal government has a direct funding agreement.

"The opportunity is there for the Navajo Nation now to take one step closer to true self-determination of our transportation system," Chaco said.

For the past year, NDOT has been navigating through the approval process for the legislation. Approval would mean streamlining the transportation system and working collaboratively with the BIA.

"The Navajo Nation has no control at this time of those construction dollars we receive," Chaco said. "This (agreement) gives us the opportunity to actually look at what's out there with our construction dollars and see what is spent with our Navajo Nation money that the BIA currently oversees."

The committee members spoke about concerns and voiced support for the legislation.

Delegate Lorenzo Curley (Houck, Lupton, Klagetoh, Nahata Dziil, Wide Ruins) shared concerns over 638 contracts getting replaced with the direct funding agreement.

“There’s a lot more control in the 638 mechanism versus the direct compact,” Curley said.

Other delegates were frustrated with the current process.

Duane Tsinigine (Bodaway-Gap, Coppermine, K’aiibi’to, LeChee, Red Lake-Tonalea) said he was tired of the BIA and the blame game when it came to transportation services.

“I’m thankful for Coconino County for N20 maintenance from Bodaway Gap to Coppermine,” Tsinigine said. “I appreciate the county for stepping in and maintaining it because NDOT and BIA have no money.

NDOT and the BIA developed the current agreement, which allows Coconino County to provide maintenance on BIA roads.

“BIA’s our trustee and NDOT is doing their work as a trustee. I support (the legislation) but I want to see something done,” he added.

Another delegate was exhausted with the bureaucracy.

Mel Begay (Bahastl’a’a’, Coyote Canyon, Mexican Springs, Naschitti, Tohatchi) said the agreement provides hope that the Navajo Nation will someday accommodate road maintenance needs that are long overdue.

“I’m certainly not too pleased with the BIA on how they have performed and how they have overseen our transportation system,” Begay said.

He warned that he was dubious that NDOT would be able to

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shoulder the responsibility he saw as another bureaucratic process pawned off on the Navajo Nation.

“This is just some bureaucratic policy that’s transferred to the Nation,” Begay said. “But at what cost?”

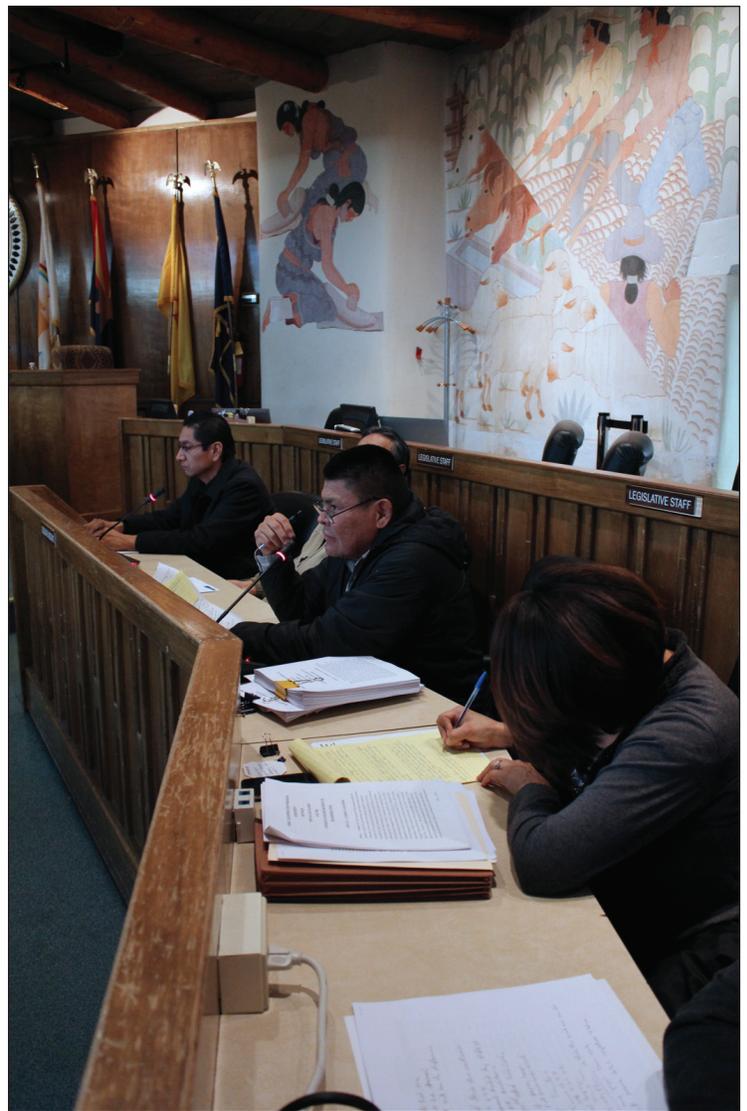
Another committee member contrasted Begay’s concerns against elders genuinely thankful for road maintenance services provided by NDOT at the grassroots level.

Edmund Yazzie said the work NDOT provides to the Navajo Nation is making a difference in his communities and spoke of a road in the Pinedale Chapter that’s been needing work for over 50 years.

“NDOT and the BIA paved two-miles of this 13-mile road. The elders are very pleased in Pinedale, they are very happy,” he said.

“NDOT has proven they aren’t all talk. They have proven that work is done and continues to be done,” Yazzie said.

Information: www.navajodot.org



Navajo Division of Transportation Director Paulson Chaco answers questions posed by members of the Naa’bik’iyati’ Committee on Dec. 6. Chaco said the direct funding agreement is the first of its kind for the Navajo Nation. (Photo by Rick Abasta)



Council delegate Duane Tsinigine (Bodaway-Gap, Coppermine, K’aiibi’to, LeChee, Red Lake-Tonalea) said he is tired of the BIA and the tedious time-consuming process for movement of transportation projects and maintenance of roads in his communities. (Photo by Rick Abasta)