

ADOT reaches out to Navajo communities on N20 paving efforts



The Bodaway-Gap Chapter was packed to capacity as community members, tribal officials, state representatives and chapter leadership met to discuss the possible paving of Navajo Route 20 as an interim detour route. ADOT was reaching out to communicate with communities affected by the road closure on U.S. 89 and provided updates on the repair of U.S. 89 and the opportunity to pave N20 using Federal Highway Administration Emergency Relief funding. (Photo by Rick Abasta)

BODAWAY GAP-The chapter house was packed to capacity and many stood along the walls and in the doorway, for a chance to listen in on the discussions for paving Navajo Route 20 as an interim detour route as U.S. 89 is repaired.

Officials from the Navajo Division of Transportation, Bureau of Indian Affairs, Arizona Department of Transportation, Coconino County and Federal Highway Administration were in attendance.

Chapter officials from Bodaway-Gap, Coppermine and LeChee facilitated the dialogue on April 1, regarding the ramifications of the road closure on U.S. 89.

U.S. 89 was closed to traffic on Feb. 20, 2013, after a dry slide occurred and damaged the roadway. ADOT rerouted traffic east on U.S. 160 and then north on State Road 98 for travelers headed to Page.

Since the road closure, several meetings have been held in an effort to get a grip on repairing the damaged roadway and paving N20 as a temporary detour to alleviate the extra 100 mile drive for the current alternative route.

Officials sat facing each other “for a round table discussion, meaningful dialogue and exchange of ideas,” said Floyd Stevens, president of Coppermine Chapter.

Paulson Chaco, director for NDOT, spoke first and said ADOT has the lead role in the project.

“NDOT and BIA are just helping,” Chaco said. “We’re working with the right-of-way for ADOT. They want to pave quickly but there’s no right-of-way in place.”

He said President Shelly made it a priority for NDOT to assist ADOT in the development of N20 paving efforts during his visit to the chapter on Feb. 24.

Robert Samour, senior deputy state engineer for ADOT, shared a presentation on the restoration of U.S. 89 and the paving efforts for N20.

“I wanted to share some of the challenges, show you where we are and where we think we’re going,” Samour said.

He explained the slope failure of Feb. 20 resulted in a five-foot drop on the pavement and 500-feet of roadway movement. Additionally, the pavement separated and created large gaps with cracking near the shoulder of the red rock formation, he said.

Switching gears to N20 as a potential interim detour route, Samour said the first step would be geotechnical collection and the second step is restoration of essential traffic.

Samour said, “We believe

that N20 provides an opportunity, if we can come to an agreement of the actual scope of that project. Paving N20, the approximately 27 miles of dirt road, we believe would help relieve the current 100 mile detour that's in place."

He stressed site security at U.S. 89 and said safety is paramount, meaning no pedestrians and no public access. He said there have been six breaches of security and that somebody cut down the fences at both ends of the project, sometime between Mar. 30 and 31.

Emergency access is available through the site for first responders like ambulances, fire department and police. Members of the community have tried to access the roadway stating they have an emergency, which is unacceptable.

Geverne Begay, vice president for Bodaway-Gap, shared concerns about the hiring of workers to pave N20.

She asked, "Would our Navajo people here have first preference?"

Begay also mentioned concerns about the public outreach efforts and asked if an office could be established at one of the community chapters, including a liaison familiar with the communities.

Samour said ADOT would have Tribal Employment Rights Office specifications as a part of their contract "to hire a certain percentage of tribal members."

"We need to do a better job of getting out," Samour said. "I apologize if anyone feels that outreach hasn't been adequate up-to-date."

Responding to concerns about fencing, he said as the scope of work increased, it moves the project away from an interim repair to an ultimate project and ineligibility for relief funding from the FHWA.

Ammon Heier, area engineer for the FHWA, said as an emergency relief project, the

paving of N20 would utilize a specific pot of money at the national level, which has stipulations.

"We're fortunate we can pave a road that needs paving. It has to be done as expeditiously as possible," Heier said. "It's a balancing act."

Others spoke of the effects of traveling on N20.

"Our major concern is the condition of N20 right now," said Jim Walker, superintendent of Page Unified School District.

Walker explained that at least 10 buses travel on the 28-mile dirt road to transport 178 kids from the reservation communities.

He was worried about making it to the end of the school year on May 18.

"If we don't do a better job maintaining that road, I'm going to have more buses in the repair shop than on the road," Walker said.

The closure of U.S. 89 hit the pocketbooks of many residents.

Coleen Mountain, president of the Antelope Trails Vendor Association, said her members are directly impacted.

"They make a living from their art. It pays for their electricity, it feeds their children," Mountain said.

Artists used to sell their goods 200-yards from where the landslide occurred.

"It's a way of life for us. It makes us self-sufficient and independent. We are in desperation: financially, emotionally, mentally and physically," Mountain said.

NDOT continues work on expediting the approval of the temporary easement, along with the BIA and the target date for ADOT construction to begin on N20 is May 1.

Information:
www.navajodot.org



Geverne Begay, vice president of Bodaway-Gap, asked Robert Samour, senior deputy state engineer for ADOT, if Navajo Preference would apply during the hiring of construction crewmembers to pave N20. She also said ADOT needed to hire a liaison that was familiar with the local communities because traveling to Page, where ADOT's public relations efforts are headquartered, inhibits many community members from sharing concerns. (Photo by Rick Abasta)



"We're fortunate we can pave a road that needs paving," said Ammon Heier, area engineer for Federal Highway Administration. He said because the road was going to be funded by the emergency relief funding, the paving project had to be done as expeditiously as possible and would be done with minimal improvements in accordance with federal guidelines. (Photo by Rick Abasta)