

Senate Bill 1317 to allow tribes a seat at the table for aviation funding



The Window Rock Airport is one of seven airports owned by the Navajo Nation, four of which are in Arizona. Senate Bill 1317 is legislation that would allow tribally-owned airports to compete for grants from the Arizona Aviation Fund. (Photo by Rick Abasta)

PHOENIX—On March 27, 2013, the House Appropriations Committee convened at the State Capitol and listened to reports on proposed legislation, including Senate Bill 1317, which would allow publically-owned airports on Indian reservations to be eligible for grants from the Arizona Aviation Fund.

Senator Jack Jackson, Jr. (D-Dist. 7) sponsored the legislation that would allow the 14 tribally-owned airports to compete for aviation funding to repair and maintain tribal airports and runways.

“I used to be part owner of an air transport company located on the reservation and we did a lot of medical transports off the reservation,” Jackson said. “I know firsthand the need for improved runways and improved airports as well.”

SB 1317 would allow tribes to compete for funds to improve their airports, he said.

Representative Michelle

Ugenti (R-Dist. 23) asked how much money the tribes would be eligible for.

Corinne Nystrom, president of the Arizona Aviation Association, said the maximum amount for any individual airport on an annual basis is 10 percent of what is in the Aviation Fund.

She noted that over the past two years, the fund hovered around \$20 million, which

meant each individual airport could compete for \$2 million.

“The airports compete for these funds, based upon the types of projects that they are going after. Priority is always given to the projects that have do with aviation safety,” Nystrom said.

Aviation fuel and aircraft registration fees imposed upon pilots who register their aircraft in Arizona are the sources of funding.

“It is totally funded by the users, there is no taxpayer funding that’s included in (the Aviation Fund),” she said.

Pilots on the reservation have been contributing to the fund every year, but the original leg-

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Representative Jamescita Peshlakai (D-Dist. 7) said Arizona is the ancestral homeland of 22 tribes, 14 of which own airports.

“Most were funded in full

by tribal nations and have never been funded by the state, yet all manner of its operating and creation have contributed and continue to contribute to state revenues,” Peshlakai said.

As SB 1317 made its way through the State Legislature, she said the Transportation Committee questioned why the provision to include Indian airports wasn’t already in the statutes.

“Native Americans have a complex history with government and specifically, here in Arizona,” Peshlakai said.

Citing the heroics of the Navajo Code Talkers that made victory possible for the Allied Forces to end World War II, she said Native Americans were not recognized as citizens until 1948, illustrating the tenuous relationship between Indians and the government.

“I ask you now, to right this longstanding oversight, basically non-acknowledgement of Native

Americans owning airports,” she said.

Peshlakai is also a member of the Veterans Caucus in the House of Representatives and served in the Persian Gulf War. Native Americans contribute to the overall greatness of the country and the state, she added.

She said, “We really need to bring this type of infrastructure to our nations because we are a destination point: Grand Canyon, Monument Valley, etc.”

Arlando Teller, program manager for Navajo Division of Transportation’s Department of Airport Management, spoke of tribes taking advantage of multimodalism and its positive impact on Indian nations.

“The Navajo Nation is no

NDOT Director Paulson Chaco said he supports the bill simply to improve the safety of the traveling public.

“The bill will also provide regional mobility for the northern part of the State of Arizona and create some collaboration and partnership with the State,” Chaco said.

He said NDOT is currently collaborating with the Arizona Department of Transportation regarding the road closure on U.S. 89 and potential paving of Navajo Route 20 as an interim detour route.

That particular effort is a prime example of how serious the Navajo Nation takes mobility within the state, he noted.

“This is just another step in

“ All we’re asking for is that we have a fair share to compete with our aviation partners. ”

exception. We are taking advantage of improving our roads, improving rail and goods movement, and also trying to improve our airports infrastructure,” Teller said.

He said the Navajo Nation owns seven airports, four of which are located in Arizona. The Navajo airports in Arizona have been funded by the tribe and the Federal Aviation Administration.

“All we’re asking for is that we have a fair share to compete with our aviation neighbors, like Falcon Field Airport and Sky Harbor,” Teller said. “We’re willing to compete and we want a seat at the table.”

that direction,” Chaco said.

Eric Descheenie, representing the Navajo County Board of Supervisors, read a letter of support from the board into the record.

The NCBOS stated they supported the efforts of NDOT and Sen. Jackson in passing SB 1317 to allow Arizona tribes to participate in the Aviation Fund.

He cited concerns in the area of public safety, such as emergency preparedness response for events like forest fires.

The committee passed SB 1317 with a vote of 11-0.

Information:
www.navajodot.org

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Top, a windsock flutters in the light breeze at the Window Rock Airport recently. Like most Navajo Nation airports, the Window Rock Airport is in need of funding to repair the runway and maintain the aging facility. Center, the logo of the Navajo Nation is prominently displayed on aircraft owned by the tribe. This logo is displayed outside the offices of the Window Rock Airport. Bottom, the interior of the Window Rock Airport includes maps, aerial photo graphs and clocks keeping the various time zones. (Photo by Rick Abasta)