

Tribal, state, federal officials break ground for N20 paving construction



Tsinaabaas Ha'bitiin Elementary School hosted the groundbreaking ceremony for the paving of Navajo Route 20 on June 9. Officials from NDOT, ADOT, BIA and FHWA were on hand to share the history of the project. (Photo by Rick Abasta)

GAP, ARIZ.-Humble gratitude was the emotional atmosphere and mindset, as the Navajo Division of Transportation, Arizona Department of Transportation, Bureau of Indian Affairs and Federal Highway Administration broke ground for the paving of a 27 mile dirt road located in rural northern Arizona.

After months of planning and negotiations between tribal, state and federal entities, the paving construction of Navajo Route 20 for use as an interim detour route for U.S. 89 is officially underway.

U.S. 89, a 1,252 mile highway stretching from Flagstaff to the Canadian border in Montana, was damaged on Feb. 20, 2013, after a dry landslide tore a segment of the road on the Navajo Nation, near Bitter Springs.

For the past three months, ADOT has been conducting geotechnical analysis to repair the roadway and diverted traffic for Page through U.S. 160 and State Route 98, an additional 115 miles of road to travel.

The groundbreaking ceremony at Tsinaabaas Ha'bitiin Elementary School on Sunday was a major milestone for ADOT stakeholders. Upon completion, the tribal road will provide the most direct route to Page and beyond until repairs on U.S. 89 are made.

The new detour will be designated as U.S. 89T and shaves off half the distance and time to get to Page.

"I want to thank all of the people that were involved," said Paulson Chaco, division director for NDOT.

Speaking in Navajo, Chaco

said N20 would be paved, thanks to the tireless work of Navajo leaders, chapter officials and grazing officers.

"You helped us with chapter resolutions of support and I am very thankful and appreciative. (NDOT) helped with this road for over three months, working with ADOT, Bureau of Indian Affairs and Federal Highway Administration," Chaco said.

Navajo Nation President Ben Shelly said working together and partnership was the key to success.

"I want to thank everyone for working together these past couple of months to bring us to this day where we can begin construction on Navajo Route 20," Shelly said.

Four days after the landslide, Shelly and staff met with community members in Bodaway-Gap to hear concerns

from the affected communities. He signed an emergency declaration the same day and sent it to Arizona Governor Jan Brewer.

"I'm happy to report that the paving of N20 now stands at \$35 million and will include fencing, culverts, turning lanes, and an appropriate speed limit for the safety of all," Shelly said.

He added, "By working together, we have proven that we can complete major projects like this and improve the quality of life for our Navajo people and our Arizona and American citizens."

The Bureau of Indian Affairs magnified the efforts from the affected Navajo communities.

"Based upon their willingness and ability to see the need for this particular road to

be built through their communities is what opened this door, is what made this come to realization,” said Sharon Pinto, regional director for BIA Navajo Region.

Tsinaabaqs Ha’bitiin (Wagon Wheel) has a new meaning, she said.

Jennifer Toth, ADOT state engineer, said transportation is very personal to the community and those that use the roads.

“U.S. 89 is not just another state highway. It’s a critical route along which children are transported to and from schools. Commuters, hard-working people use it to commute to their jobs and goods and services are delivered,” Toth said.

She echoed the sentiments of partnership and cooperation.

Toth said, “Based on my experience, I can tell you that generally road construction projects typically do not materialize in a three month time period. And a project where you’re paving 27 miles of roadway can really take years to become a reality.”

The enormity of the project was not lost on the stakeholders involved: paving a 27 mile dirt road that has needed improvement for over 40 years in a three month timeframe is not for the weak-hearted.

Since 2004, ADOT and the Navajo Nation have maintained a formal partnership and follow a standardized method of collaboration on projects and incidents related on the state roads running through tribal lands.

“Without that direct collaboration between ADOT, tribal leaders, chapter presidents, and the Navajo Division of Transportation, we wouldn’t be here today in such a quick timeframe to celebrate returning mobility to the region,” Toth said.

The federal efforts underscored improving the quality of

life for motorists.

FHWA division administrator Karla Petty said the importance and urgency of the recovery efforts of the U.S. 89 landslide is recognized at the highest level of the U.S. Department of Transportation and FHWA.

“Road closures such as U.S. 89 emphasize the importance of transportation in our daily lives,” Petty said.

She explained that funding from the FHWA Emergency Relieve program provided ADOT with \$37 million for U.S. 89 recovery efforts. To address immediate responses for ADOT, \$2 million in quick release funds was made available, followed by \$35 million for the detour.

Petty said the FHWA will secure additional funding as ADOT work towards a permanent solution for U.S. 89.

“I have traveled N20 and I do appreciate the need for an improved roadway,” Petty said. “But we would not be here today without the cooperation and partnership with the Navajo Nation, the Navajo Division of Transportation, BIA, ADOT and you, the communities.

“The spirit of teamwork is evident,” she added.

Floyd Stevens, president of Coppermine Chapter, was appreciative for the construction.

“This road has many problems. It’s dry, rough, sandy, washboard, muddy at times, and it tests the meddle of even some of the toughest drivers,” Stevens said.

Information:
www.navajodot.org

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Paulson Chaco, director of Navajo Division of Transportation, said the project would not have been possible without the consent of the grazing permit holders and the people who use the land. Chaco lauded the efforts of his staff, ADOT, FHWA, BIA and local community members. (Photo by Rick Abasta)



ADOT state engineer Jennifer Toth said road construction projects do not typically materialize in a three month time period. Toth said a project involving paving 27 miles of roadway can really take years to become a reality. (Photo by Rick Abasta)



Tribal, state and federal officials stood proudly after breaking ground for the paving of Navajo Route 20 as an interim detour route for the U.S. 89 road closure. All agencies echoed the same sentiments of collaboration and cooperation to make the project a reality for the Navajo Nation, Arizona and visitors from across the country. (Photo by Rick Abasta)