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Navajo DOT Advocates for Navajo Nation's Infrastructure in Wáshindoon



The delegation, accompanied by Navajo Nation Council Delegate Nate Brown, meets with Ada Valaitis, Congressional and Tribal Affairs, and Cindi Ptak, Tribal Transportation Program Team Leader, at DOT.

March 1, Tse Bonito

– For four tireless days, representatives from the Navajo Division of Transportation (Navajo DOT), including Division Director Garret Silversmith, worked the halls of power in Washington, D.C. to advance the Navajo Nation's transportation interests. The delegation was joined by New Mexico state Representative Sharon Clahchischillige and Mark Freeland, executive staff assistant for the Navajo Nation Office of the President and Vice President.

While the impetus for the trip was educating Congress about restoring funding for dirt road maintenance on high traffic routes that serve school children, elders, veterans, and promote commerce, the delegation broadened their scope to other areas of concern for the growth of the division.

Wasting no time, the Navajo DOT team seized the opportunity to meet with the congressional delegations from Arizona, New Mexico, and Utah in addition to officials from the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers (ACE), the U.S. Department of Transportation (U.S. DOT), and the Bureau of Indian Affairs Division of Transportation at the Department of the Interior.

The week's meetings fluctuated between big picture conversations about Navajo DOT asserting more responsibility over Navajo roads from the Bureau of Indian Affairs to accessing specific federal programs that can benefit Navajo.

In a substantive meeting between ACE and Navajo DOT ACE Senior Tribal Liaison Lisa Morales explained the technical services that the corps can provide for the

tribe. She also highlighted the Corps' new Tribal Nations Technical Center of Expertise in Albuquerque where Navajo DOT staff can receive training. Navajo DOT currently employs many talented engineers who require instruction on specific skill sets such as drainage analyses and culvert installations. Ms. Morales also made plans to visit the nation in March to investigate how the Corps and Navajo can broaden their burgeoning relationship.

In meetings with U.S. DOT Navajo DOT sought information on how to make their infrastructure grant applications more competitive and how Navajo DOT can use new grant programs available

under the FAST Act, the new transportation act.

Cindi Ptak, Tribal Transportation Program Team Leader at the Federal Highway Administration (FHWA), covered the Program Agreement between U.S. DOT and the Navajo Nation signed in 2013. The document's purpose is to transfer the functions and responsibilities of the Secretary of the Interior directly to the tribe for administering FHWA funds.

Though the Program Agreement fits neatly within 20 pages, it's hard to understate the monumental impact the document has had on the nation asserting more sovereignty over its infrastructure network. Ms. Ptak pointed out that



L-R: Carl Slater, NDOT; Garret Silversmith, NDOT; Taft Blackhorse, NDOT; Nate Brown, NN Council Delegate; Cindi Ptak, FHWA; Timothy Hess, FHWA; Arlando Teller, NDOT; Mark Freeland, OPVP

the Program Agreement delineates presently the power the nation has to develop its own design standards and project management generation and project management practices.

Taft Blackhorse, Program Manager for Navajo DOT Department of Project Management, stressed that his program has adopted all relevant suggestions from FHWA and follows the National Environmental Policy Act accordingly. Yet, he stated that certain BIA officials still remain steadfast in their previous patterns, insisting that Navajo DOT get BIA approval to continue with projects using FHWA monies. After Mr. Blackhorse's explanation Associate Administrator of FHWA Office of Federal Lands Highway Timothy G. Hess committed to investigating how this



L-R: Taft Blackhorse, NDOT; LeRoy Gishi, BIA; Garret Silversmith, NDOT; Arlando Teller, NDOT

practice can end—because as he said, “that’s not what’s in the statute or Program Agreement.”

Mr. Hess also explained that his administration will assist the nation with their next TIGER grant application up to a certain point, so that the program retains its competitive nature. He, as well Director of the Office of Infrastructure

Finance and Innovation John E. Augustine, emphasized that the nation should focus on the “transformative” nature of the project for which it applies. With such dramatic needs on the nation, the nation’s TIGER grant application will have to find other ways to make a Navajo project stand out.

Later the following day, Congresswoman

Anne Kirkpatrick’s legislative director, Ken Montoya, followed up on making the Navajo Nation’s TIGER grant applications more competitive. He advised using multijurisdictional projects and leveraging potential TIGER grant funds with other states, tribes and counties’ funds.

Nearly every meeting the delegation attended either led to commitments for more collaboration between Navajo DOT and federal agencies, or resulted in niche knowledge which Navajo DOT will now use to further the Navajo Nation’s infrastructure goals.



L-R: Arlando Teller, NDOT; Lisa Morales, ACE; Mark Freeland, OPVP; Sharon Clahchischillage, NM St. Rep.; Garret Silversmith, NDOT; Taft Blackhorse, NDOT; Carl Slater, NDOT