



THE NAVAJO NATION

RUSSELL BEGAYE PRESIDENT
JONATHAN NEZ VICE PRESIDENT

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President Begaye, Vice President Nez meet with U.S. Congressmen, Senators



Navajo Nation President Russell Begaye and Vice President Jonathan Nez spent last week in Washington, D.C. meeting with Congressmen, Congresswomen and Senators on behalf of the Navajo Nation. Their first meeting was at the White House, with Raina Thiele, Associate Director for the White House Office of Intergovernmental Affairs. (Photo by Rick Abasta)

WASHINGTON, D.C.—Big Navajo is back.

From June 1 to 5, Navajo Nation President Russell Begaye and Vice President Jonathan Nez spent the week on Capitol Hill lobbying on behalf of the Navajo Nation.

Their whirlwind tour of the nation's capitol was not a haphazard affair, however.

Everything was carefully strategized and well researched before the two most powerful men in Indian Country began meeting with congressmen, congresswomen and senators from various states.

Their meetings were with majority leaders and the chairpersons of committees in both the House and Senate. Additionally, they met with key programs such as the U.S. Department of Interior and the Department of Housing and Urban Development.

At each step of the way, President Begaye and Vice

President Nez were well received by federal officials and legislators alike. They were very popular with the contingent of tribal members residing in Washington, D.C.

The Begaye-Nez administration stuck to the four pillars of their platform when addressing the nation's legislators: Navajo veterans, infrastructure, Navajo elders/youth, and employment.

President Begaye and Vice President Nez honed in on these priority areas throughout their discussions on Capitol Hill.

They explained to legislators that the four pillars were a mandate by the Navajo people that elected them into office by such an overwhelming margin against their opponent.

The Navajo people are tired of the old system, they said, adding that it was truly the "awakening of a new dawn" for the nation.

Navajo Nation Ambassador Dr. Peterson Zah, Office of the

President and Vice President Chief of Staff Robert Joe and the staff of the NNWO joined President Begaye and Vice President Nez during their packed schedule of meetings throughout the week.

They met with the White House, the House of Representatives and the Senate. No matter the meeting, their focus was always the same: the mandate of the Navajo people.

President Begaye referenced the large voting block of the Navajo Nation and its role in electing Rep. Ann Kirkpatrick (D-Ariz.) into office.

"Navajo has become a swing vote and people in Arizona know that Navajo voters got Rep. Kirkpatrick into office. That's why she took her oath of office inside the Navajo Nation Council Chamber," said President Begaye.

He said the paternalism of the federal government of the past needs to be redefined to

allow the Navajo Nation to begin creating new jobs through manufacturing, negotiating water rights settlements with the three states and reforming appropriations funding formulas that favor smaller tribes that vote against Big Navajo.

Many of the people who are unemployed include segments of the 22,000 Navajo veterans residing on the nation. The veterans are also in need of housing and mental health counseling services for their post-traumatic stress disorder.

"Our veterans are saying they've been forgotten from one administration to the next, that countless politicians used them to get elected, but once in office, nothing happened," President Begaye said.

The Begaye-Nez administration is determined to get the Navajo Nation Veterans Act passed to address these many concerns.

The other pillar was focused

on Navajo elders and youth, which are interrelated by the preservation of the Navajo language and culture.

Vice President Nez said the 2014 presidential election was a contentious time in the tribe's history and framed in the middle of the controversy was *Dine' bizaad* and the effort to preserve it for the future generations.

"Our Navajo elders are the foundation of who we are, our cultural identity. We need to encourage our elders to spend time with our youth. The youth can take care of them and in return, our elders can teach them our language and traditions," said Vice President Nez.

The other component to be addressed by the administration, he said, was the need for nursing homes and assisted living centers across the nation for Navajo elders.

Vice President Nez said, "We need to provide these kind of facilities so our elders can eat traditional Navajo food, communicate in Navajo and be taken care of by people who understand the culture and language."

The large land base of the Navajo Nation must be taken into consideration when decisions are made on infrastructure development, President Begaye said, especially when it comes to the funding formulas for distribution.

"People don't understand our unique issues. It's hard to imagine unless you travel the land and meet the people, visit homes and families," President Begaye said. "People are constantly hauling water for drinking, cooking, bathing and livestock."

He shared the story about how he and Vice President Nez presented a check for more than \$168,000 for power line extensions in the Tsayatoh Chapter in N.M. in late May 2015, along with tribal council delegate Seth Damon.

The chapter members wept

at the news that their community would finally receive electricity after a lifetime of waiting for electricity.

"One young man in the eleventh grade stood up and said he and his siblings studied every night with their flashlights. It was a humbling experience to see our people get those necessities of life we take for granted," President Begaye said.

He noted that the needs of electricity and water on the nation are overshadowed by the demand for broadband access. Only a small portion of the nation has online access because other infrastructure like electricity must be in place before Internet access can occur, he added.

Vice President Nez said the other mandate from Navajo voters was for job creation to combat the high number of unemployed Navajos, which hovers at more than 50 percent.

Possibilities included taking advantage of the desert economy of the Navajo Nation to begin producing goods from local products such as yucca plants for the production of soap, lotions, ointments, lip balm and other products.

"Yanabah Navajo Tea is being sold right now across the country and that's an example of our desert economy creating not only jobs, but economic development. Our people are attached to the land, that is why many of our elders refused to leave, even during the Navajo-Hopi relocation," Vice President Nez said.

He also spoke of innovative efforts like those employed by Habitat For Humanity utilizing sweat equity for tax credits and mentorship programs to help with initiatives like building homes for Navajo veterans.

Throughout the week, the Navajo delegation met with 11 congressmen and congresswomen, seven senators, and several leaders from various federal departments.



Vice President Jonathan Nez explains issues facing the Navajo people to Sen. Tom Udall (D-N.M.) during a meeting at the Hart Senate Office Building on June 4. Sen. Udall is the ranking member of the U.S. Senate Subcommittee on Interior, Environment and related agencies. (Photo by Rick Abasta)



President Russell Begaye speaks with Congressman Don Young (R-Ala.) at the Rayburn Building on June 3. Rep. Young is the Chairman of the House Subcommittee on Indian, Insular and Alaska Native Affairs. The meeting was cordial and productive. (Photo by Rick Abasta)



President Begaye speaks with Congressman Ben Ray Lujan (D-N.M.) on the afternoon of June 1 at the Rayburn House Office Building. The discussions were focused on a number of issues facing the Navajo Nation from the reauthorization of NAHASDA to Navajo veterans. (Photo by Rick Abasta)