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## PRESIDENT BEGAYE AND VICE PRESIDENT NEZ TELL SENATORS MCCAIN AND BARRASSO THAT OBLIGATIONS UNDER THE NAVAJO HOPI SETTLEMENT ACT NEED TO BE FULFILLED



After the Roundtable Discussion that took place on Friday, Sep. 16 at the Karigan Building, President Begaye and Vice President Nez along with key staff and Council delegates met with U.S. Senator John Barrasso and Sen. John McCain to discuss the phasing out of ONHIR. Pictured around the table, left to right: 23rd Navajo Nation Council Delegate Raymond Smith Jr. (Klagetoh, Wide Ruins, Houck, Lupton, Nahata Dziil), Sen. John Barrasso (R-WY), Vice President Jonathan Nez, President Russell Begaye, Council Delegate Dwight Witherspoon (Hard Rock, Forest Lake, Pinon, Black Mesa, Whippoorwill), Senator John McCain (R-AZ) and Navajo Nation Attorney General Ethel Branch.

WINDOW ROCK, ARIZ.-During a meeting that took place after the Roundtable Discussion with the Senate Committee on Indian Affairs that included U.S. Senator John Barrasso (R-WY) and Sen. John McCain (R-AZ), both President Russell Begaye and Vice President Jonathan Nez said they want to see the federal government own up to their obligations in concluding relocation efforts before the Office of Navajo and Hopi Indian Relocation (ONHIR) is phased out.

“The people who have been subject to relocation have been wronged and they need to be served,” President Begaye said. “Obligations have been made to them and these obligations need to be fulfilled.”

In the discussion, Sen. McCain adamantly questioned the number of houses that have been built and cases resolved since the Bennett Freeze had been lifted ten years ago.

“Isn’t there a point where we can resolve some of these issues?” McCain asked. “We are talking about 50 million dollars that has been spent. That’s a lot of money and I need to see an endpoint, which is a fundamental premise of everything we do.”

Legal Counsel for the Office of the President and Vice President, Karis Begaye told the senator that relocation efforts have not been concluded and that there are approximately 138 cases remaining and many left on appeal. She told Sen. McCain that not having a Presidentially appointed commissioner in place for 22 years has not helped cases to be resolved.



**President Begaye told Senators Barrasso and McCain that the federal government created ‘the mess’ of relocation and that the government is responsible for fulfilling obligations in cleaning up the mess.**

In assessing the phasing out of ONHIR, the Navajo Nation and possibly the Bureau of Indian Affairs will have to assume the responsibility of overseeing 400K acres of land that is currently riddled with lack of infrastructure that includes water and electric lines, roads and housing development.

“We support the closing of ONHIR once they complete the relocation and fulfill their obligations under the Act,” Begaye said. “We would like to see the responsibilities transferred to the BIA and Executive Branch but we need to see that all responsibilities and obligations are fulfilled before the office is closed.”

When ONHIR is phased out, President Begaye said the Nation will need to ensure that funding continues.

“We need these funds for the relocatees,” he said. “Leasing issues and road maintenance will not stop. Development and maintenance of infrastructure will not stop. Homes need to be replaced. Roads and electric lines need to be put in.”

Navajo Nation Vice President Jonathan Nez said families of the Former Bennett Freeze Area have suffered immensely, resulting from the lack of housing and infrastructure to the trauma residents endured over decades.

“These issues cannot be resolved overnight. Our Navajo families in the Former Bennett Freeze Area need closure and healing from the decades of oppression imposed by the federal government. Continued funding for the development of the region must not be impeded. Federal funding to the area must continue in order to provide healing and restore balance to an area of the Navajo Nation that was frozen for nearly half a century,” Vice President Nez said.

The federal government cannot neglect their responsibility to the Navajo people, he added.

Before the meeting ended, President Begaye maintained that the federal government created the adverse situations and conditions of the relocation and that it’s their responsibility to clean up the mess.

“The government created this mess. It wasn’t the Hopi or Navajo that did this. Now, they are trying to pass off their responsibility, telling us they spent too much money on it. It’s unacceptable,” he said. “When you create a mess like this, you have to clean it up and that’s exactly what we are saying to the U.S. government regarding the relocation. You made promises and you have to make sure they are fulfilled.”

OPVP and both Senators agreed that a joint letter needs to be written asking President Obama to appoint a commissioner to ONHIR. They also agreed that a letter needs to be written to ONHIR Executive Director Chris Bavasi in which he clarifies when he intends to close ONHIR. Lastly, the Senators agreed a congressional hearing must occur on the matter.

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