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FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE  
DATE: Friday, July 21, 2006

### **CONGRESS REAUTHORIZES VOTING RIGHTS ACT**

Navajo Nation officials were pleased to hear that advocacy efforts to reauthorize the federal Voting Rights Act had finally paid off when the U.S. Senate voted 98-0 to reauthorize the act with no amendments on July 20, 2006.

The bills H.R. 9 and S. 2703 were introduced to Congress on May 2, 2006. The House had sent the bill to the Senate with a vote of 390-33 on July 13, 2006. The Senate Judiciary Committee passed the bill 18-0 on July 19, which brought the bill to the Senate floor yesterday.

The Office of the Speaker, as directed by the Intergovernmental Relations Committee, took the lead within the Navajo Nation to advocate for the reauthorization with site visits to area high schools and senior citizens centers.

“The Intergovernmental Relations Committee, by resolution IGRAP-23-06, supported the reauthorization of the Voting Rights Act and three key provisions, including preserving the minority language assistance program, continuing the pre-clearance requirement for states that have historically oppressed certain voters and to maintain the service of federal examiners and observers,” Speaker Lawrence T. Morgan explained.

“I want to commend Congress for putting this important legislation on the fast track. This shows the Congress’ commitment for preserving and strengthening voter rights,” Speaker Morgan said.

Speaker Morgan noted that in precincts where large segments of the population do not understand English, citizens need interpreters and explanations of materials to vote. He added that pre-clearance requirements ensure that unnecessary restrictions on voting are not imposed on citizens by requiring state and local jurisdictions to submit all proposed changes in election laws to the U.S. Department of Justice for review and approval. The speaker added that the presence of federal observers is very important in areas that have a documented history of intimidating voters.

“But is the Act enough? That’s an important question considering Arizona’s new law that requires identification at the polls. Our work concerning Congressional redistricting in

the state of Arizona leaves the Navajo Nation in a convoluted representative district,” the speaker said.

Leila Help-Tulley, staff assistant with the Speaker’s office, made visits to educate Navajo students and senior citizens on the importance of renewing the federal Act. Joining her for several visits was Marcus Tulley from the Navajo Board of Election Supervisors. Help-Tulley visited schools at Monument Valley in both Arizona and Utah; Gallup, New Mexico; Window Rock, Arizona; Ritchfield, Utah; and South Sevier, Utah, collecting a total of 2,169 signatures from high school students. Letters were sent to the each of the Congressmen in both the House and the Senate representing the respective areas.

Help-Tulley also visited senior citizens to advocate on the reauthorization at Pinon, Arizona; Sanostee, New Mexico; Two Grey Hills, New Mexico; Tuba City, Arizona; Bodaway/Gap, Arizona; Baca, New Mexico and at the Chinle Navajo Area Agency on Aging meeting where people from Chapters throughout the entire Central Navajo Agency were represented. A total of 1,996 signatures were collected and sent to Congress.

“What was interesting is that some of our elderly were unable to sign their name, but they wanted to make sure that their voice was heard and they left their thumbprint,” Help-Tulley said. “They were eager to make a difference for future generations.”

All in all, 4,165 signatures were sent to Congressional representatives advocating for the Voting Rights Act reauthorization.

The Voting Rights Act of 1965 is considered one of the most important pieces of legislation regarding civil rights in America. The Act was enacted by Congress to address serious national concerns over voting rights of all people. Generally, the law was passed to make it illegal for states and local governments to discriminate against people based on race and ethnicity in conducting elections.

“I would like to thank our Congressional representatives who voted to renew the Voting Rights Act with no amendments. Most of all, I would like to thank and commend our students and elderly who, through their advocacy, ensured that our rights as voters are protected for another 25 years,” Speaker Morgan said, noting that it is anticipated that President George W. Bush will sign the bill into law. “While there were attempts to shorten the renewal period from 25 years to 10 years and to remove the minority language assistance provisions in the House, those attempts were unsuccessful and the provisions that we prefer remained in the bill.”