Health, Social Services Committee meets with Navajo Area Indian Health Services, Navajo Housing Authority to discuss Legislation No. 0160-10

WINDOW ROCK, Ariz. – The Health and Social Services Committee of the 21st Navajo Nation Council met today with officials from the Navajo Area Indian Health Services and Navajo Housing Authority to discuss Legislation No. 0160-10, which was tabled by the Council during its spring session.

“This is a real good discussion the point of it being how we merge these programs – Navajo Housing Authority (NHA) and Indian Health Services (IHS) together so that they can communicate,” Council Delegate Leonard Teller (Lukachukai/Tsáalé/Wheatfields) said when opening up discussion on his tabled legislation. “There is no discussion that goes on, which is exactly where the issue comes from. It makes all the sense in the world to be able to talk together; only in that fashion can we meet our constituent needs.”

According to the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services annual Appropriations Act, “none of the funds appropriated to the Indian Health Service may be used for sanitation facilities construction for new homes funded with grants by the housing programs of the U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development (HUD).”

Based on the new language, HUD funded projects or grants given to tribal entities, such as the NHA, for new homes are prohibited from using funds appropriated to the IHS according P.L. 86-121, which has created confusion or the lack of cooperation between the IHS and NHA.

In response to the appropriation language, Council Delegate Teller sponsored a piece of legislation (Legislation No. 0106-10) requesting Congress to delete the new language from the annual Appropriations Act because the new language restricts NHA and IHS from using their funds jointly and cooperatively to build new homes with proper sanitation facilities.

When the measure was tabled, the Council issued a directive to resolve areas of disagreements between NHA and IHS; thus, referred the legislation back to the oversight committee or Health and Social Services Committee (HSSC), IHS, and NHA.

At the special meeting, a report by Rodger Slape, director for Division of Sanitation Facilities Construction at Navajo Area IHS, indicated that Teller’s measure would impact IHS’ priority list of providing water and sewer facilities to “newly constructed, recently renovated and existing medical referral individual Navajo homes.”

According to a resolution passed by the Navajo Area IHS’ Health Board, IHS funding under P.L. 86-121 is used to provide water and sewer facilities to approximately 400 individual Navajo homes each year and passage Legislation No. 0106-10 would impact 666 sanitation facilities projects on the Navajo Nation. The Navajo Division of Health and resolutions from Leupp and Bodaway-Gap chapter governments recommend Council not to pass the legislation.

“Nationally, this will have an impact on us if we use the housing support money,” Slape added. “For Navajo, that impact would be about 500 homes a share.”

Council Delegate Evelyn Acothley (Bodaway-Gap/Cameron/Coppermine) said: “At the national level, I know that there was
an attempt made through the process in which the House appropriation reaffirmed its position not to fund HUD’S NAHASDA program because NAHASDA projects are more direct funding of community based programs.”

After accepting Slape’s report, the committee heard from Teller and Aneva Yazzie, CEO of NHA, regarding the intent of legislation No. 0106-10.

“The intent of this legislation is not competition for funding,” Yazzie said. “The appropriation prohibits NHA and IHS from using both jointly funds and collaborating to build new homes. We are talking about the need for collaboration at the community level.”

Council Delegate Jerry Freddie (Dilcon/Teesto) said feedback from the NHA public hearings, which were conducted by the Government Services Committee (GSC), would need to be incorporated into the discussion. “I think one of the most important documents we need to see, perhaps we can direct that to our advisors, is getting the GSC report on the public hearings,” Freddie said. “There were a lot of good recommendations from the people we will need to address.”

Council Delegate Acothley motioned to keep the legislation at table status and continue discussion on these issues with all stakeholders – IHS, NHA, Navajo Tribal Utility Authority, Housing Services – who are involved in providing housing, sanitation facilities and utility services and to come to a consensus that will benefit the Navajo people.

“It is better we have the issue at table status and include more collaboration because the topic of discussion is for the benefit our constituents,” Acothley said. “It is going to take everyone to correct these issues.”

“Again, our interest in this discussion is health specific,” Council Delegate Thomas Walker (Birdsprings/Leupp/Tolani Lake), chairman of the HSSC, explained. “We see the benefit of collaboration. It is all good and beneficial for our people. We will try to collaborate without having to go to the federal government for major change.”

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