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Law and Order Committee receives status reports on Shiprock police and judicial districts

SHIPROCK, N.M. – The Law and Order Committee traveled on Monday, holding their regular meeting at the Navajo Engineering & Construction Authority office building, where they received status reports on the present activities and concerns held by the Shiprock Police District and the Shiprock Judicial District.

“We have a number of challenges that we are currently working on,” said acting Navajo chief of police, Capt. Ivan Tsosie, who mentioned that officers have been working diligently to cut down on the number of pending police and vehicle accident reports within the department.

Capt. Tsosie also said the police district has also been addressing complaints from the public for lack of or no response to calls for assistance, but said it still poses a challenge as police officers divide their time to provide services to Navajo communities over great land expanses.

Currently, the Shiprock Police District is coordinating with the Ute Mountain Ute Tribe on installing a signal repeater atop one of the nearby mountains in the area to broaden communication between on-scene police officers and police dispatch.

The police district has also been coordinating with area school districts and BIA schools on the development of response plans in the event that a shooting were to occur within the school or the community.

Additionally, Capt. Tsosie said the police district is partnering with a local company to erect billboards for a community safety campaign aimed at cautioning people against texting or drinking while driving.

Discussion about the Judicial/Public Safety Facilities Fund Priority List surfaced at the conclusion of Capt. Tsosie’s report, when he asked the committee to retain Shiprock as one of the 5 prioritized facility construction projects at the top of the list.

The Shiprock project is currently number two on the list, after Chinle. It is then followed by Fort Defiance, Pinon, and Dilkon.

“Right now, we are shovel-ready and ready to go,” said Captain Tsosie. “We just need the funds.”

In response, LOC vice chair Council Delegate Alton Joe Shepherd (Cornfields, Ganado, Jeddito, Kin Dah Łichíí’, Steamboat) maintained his position that he wants to make sure the committee addresses the priority listing determinations in a fashion where projects that have all the necessary pre-construction requirements ready would be prioritized higher up on the construction priority list.

“Everybody is coming to this Law and Order Committee saying that they have a greater need, and this type of comparison evaluation would paint a better picture of how to objectively assess these projects,” Delegate Shepherd said.

Shiprock Chapter President Duane “Chili” Yazzie was also in attendance at the Monday meeting to convey his support to keep Shiprock at the top of the priority list, and also acknowledged the dilemmas the LOC gets placed in when addressing the extent of needs of numerous Navajo communities for public safety, judicial, and detention facilities.

“Other communities that are competing for the same pot of funds, I don’t discount the severity of their needs,” said Yazzie, who mentioned that Shiprock is the highest populated chapter on the Navajo Nation.

“This facility will certainly meet the needs of the greater number of people. As leaders we try to meet the needs of the greater number of people the best way we can,” Yazzie continued. “Keep our Shiprock complex up at the top of the list.”

When it came to the Shiprock Judicial District status report, court administrator Ethel Laughing provided statistics on the number of cases that were addressed this year from Jan. 1 through Mar. 29.

According to Laughing, the number of cases brought forward to the Shiprock Judicial District numbered 3,532, along with an additional 932 cases that have been filed.

These numbers amount to an overall caseload of 4,464 cases. Of that number, 747 cases have been closed, which leaves a total of 3,717 cases pending within the district.

Laughing praised the district’s implementation and use of JustWare, a case management software that allows the district court to enhance how information is shared and managed with prosecutors, courts, peacemaking, public defenders, and probation.

The district court is looking at using JustWare to introduce the conveniences of e-filing and e-payments for the general public. In the future, the public could electronically file requests or make electronic payments to the court over the internet.

LOC member Council Delegate Russell Begaye (Shiprock) asked Laughing she anticipated any impacts to the judicial district’s operations due to the sequestration cutbacks.

“We are looking at a 5 percent cut...minimal,” answered Laughing. “Based on our assessment, we feel we are safe, and should be able to employ employees in our district.”

The Law and Order Committee wrapped up discussion on the reports by iterating that they will soon be selecting a date to hold a work session with officials from the Navajo Nation Judicial Branch to discuss possible amendments to the Judicial/Public Safety Facilities Fund Priority List.

Both reports by the Shiprock Police District and the Shiprock Judicial District were each approved by committee members with a vote of 3-0.

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