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## **Resources and Development Committee receives update on construction schedule and details for Navajo Route 20 pavement project**

*N20 identified as temporary detour route while repairs on collapsed US89 are on-going*

WINDOW ROCK – The Resources and Development Committee on Tuesday received a report on the latest developments regarding the closure of U.S. Highway 89 and plans to construct a temporary detour route on Navajo Route 20, south of Page, Ariz.

Officials from the Navajo Department of Transportation, the Arizona Department of Transportation, and the Bureau of Indian Affairs went before the RDC to provided segments of the report.

A landslide occurred in the early morning hours of Feb. 20, causing the US 89 to buckle and making it impassable.

NDOT Director Paulson Chaco said the Federal Highway Administration recently authorized Quick Release Funds of \$2 million to begin repairing US 89.

The plan is to pave Navajo Route 20 as a temporary detour route by this summer, Chaco said. The project is estimated to cost between \$15-20 million.

The emergency relief funding is intended to “get a detour in place as soon as possible,” and is limited in its use, Chaco told the committee. It cannot be used to construct any ultimate improvements.

According to NDOT, there are no provisions for fencing along the N20 detour route, but ADOT deputy state engineer of development Dallas Hammit said his agency is “looking at other areas to get funding for fencing.”

It was unsettling for Council Delegate Katherine Benally (Chilchinbeto, Dennehotso, Kayenta) to note that there were no plans or measures prepared by either of the transportation agencies accounting for the protection of livestock along N20, as well as the hazards they impose on traveling motorists.

“All that land is open range where the detour road is being proposed. What type of notification have those people received who depend on those animals as their livelihood? What information has been shared with them?” inquired Delegate Benally.

She further questioned how livestock, the people’s livelihood, would be protected.

Lacking protection measures, Delegate Benally stated, “That’s very dangerous. That’s not only dangerous for the people who depend on their livestock, but it’s also dangerous for the people will be traveling.”

It poses a “big liability question,” said Delegate Benally, who asked transportation officials which agency would take responsibility for that.

Council Delegate Jonathan Nez (Shonto, Navajo Mountain, Oljato, Ts'ah Bii Kin) informed the committee and representatives from NDOT, BIA, and ADOT that Diné citizens in his represented communities – particularly Shonto, Ts'ah Bii Kin, and Navajo Mountain – have expressed concerns about the high amounts of detour traffic funneling through the area on Arizona State Route 98 to Page, due to the closure of US 89.

With the summer tourist season approaching, that traffic is only expected to increase.

“Public safety has been a concern. Navajo County [deputies] recently got cross-commissioning, so they’re there on the Navajo County side reminding visitors, as well as our own Navajo citizens, to take it easy on these routes,” Delegate Nez said.

Delegate Nez mentioned he has not observed this level of protection or interaction from public safety officials in nearby Coconino County, “but that’s another discussion to have,” he said.

Both Delegate Benally and Delegate Nez expressed dissatisfaction with the proposed construction plans for N20, seeing them as sub-par, and less than what local Diné residents deserved.

“I’m a little furious with what is going on here. Emergency or not, there needs to be consideration for our people,” said Delegate Benally, who noted that she was aware that certain emergency funding President Barack Obama had set aside for Tribes. “Maybe this Council needs to go directly to Obama, and ask why the proposed roads are half-shoddy already.”

Delegate Benally asked profusely why sufficient drainages and turn-offs were not included in the construction design of N20.

“If this happened off the Navajo Nation, how much money would the Federal Highway Administration or FEMA pour into restoration, or even doing a detour road? Not the peanuts that we’re getting. I take offense to that,” expressed Delegate Benally.

It was not only in the best interest of local residents, “but for Arizona to get this route permanent,” said Delegate Nez, who added that he believed “it is the responsibility of ADOT to put more funding into the alternate route.”

Delegate Nez requested for ADOT to visit his chapters along SR 98 and provide a report.

NDOT stated that the anticipated detour duration is expected to span two years.

The Federal Highway Administration has not yet determined how much it will cost to repair US 89, nor has it been determined how long repairs are expected to last.

Geotechnical experts and engineers are currently conducting an investigation of the US 89 landslide.

The Resources and Development Committee voted to accept the report with a vote of 4-0.

“We want to have a meeting with all parties as soon as possible,” Delegate Benally said at the conclusion of the report.

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