



23RD NAVAJO NATION COUNCIL OFFICE OF THE SPEAKER

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Budget and Finance Committee demands accountability from the Veterans Administration to construct homes for Navajo veterans

WINDOW ROCK – On Tuesday, the Budget and Finance Committee voted 3-2 in support of Legislation No. 0258-17, which seeks the Navajo Nation Council’s approval to extend the availability of funds from the Veterans Trust Fund for the Navajo Nation’s Veterans Housing Program until the end of fiscal year 2018, or the end of September 2018.

Legislation sponsor Council Delegate Steven Begay (Coyote Canyon, Mexican Springs, Naschitti, Tohatchi, Bahastl’a’a’) said that approving the legislation would provide the Navajo Nation Veterans Administration, which is under the Office of the President and Vice President, an additional year to construct and renovate homes for Navajo veterans. He also noted that the legislation is supported by veteran organizations from the Northern Agency and the Fort Defiance Agency, adding that he anticipates other agencies to pass supporting resolutions also.

In Sept. 2013, the Council passed resolution CS-48-13 sponsored by Council Delegate Alton Joe Shepherd (Jeddito, Cornfields, Ganado, Kin Dah Lichíí, Steamboat), which provided a portion of the annual set-aside from the Veterans Trust Fund to construct up to 15 homes and provide repairs and renovations for Navajo veterans in each of the five agencies for a period of four years.

Despite the BFC’s support of the legislation on Tuesday, the members conveyed many concerns over an audit report conducted by the Office of the Auditor General that showed several critical deficiencies within the Veterans Housing Program. The report indicated that the Veterans Administration was unable to show exactly how \$1.9 million of a lump sum payment to Home Depot for materials was spent. The report also stated that homes were constructed for individuals that were not eligible to receive a new home under the program.

Recently the Health, Education, and Human Services Committee and the Budget and Finance Committee approved a corrective action plan that requires the Veterans Administration to address the audit findings within one year.

BFC vice chair Council Delegate Dwight Witherspoon (Black Mesa, Forest Lake, Hardrock, Pinon, Whippoorwill) said the Veterans Administration should have implemented a fund management plan for the housing program, and proposed an amendment to direct officials to recover the

funds that were utilized to construct homes for individuals that were not eligible to receive a new home. BFC members approved the amendment with a vote of 4-0.

BFC member Council Delegate Leonard Tsosie (Baca/Prewitt, Casamero Lake, Counselor, Littlewater, Ojo Encino, Pueblo Pintado, Torreon, Whitehorse Lake) said he would not support the legislation due to the lack of accountability and progress on the part of the Veterans Administration and recommended that the program contract with an entity that is capable of producing homes for veterans. He also stated that the construction of homes for Navajo Code Talkers should be a top priority.

“All we want is for the funds to be taken care of and for more homes to be built,” said Delegate Tsosie, adding that the acting director of the Veterans Administration should provide a progress report on the construction of homes for Navajo veterans.

According to the report, the intent of the legislation passed in 2013 was to construct as many as 300 new homes for veterans across the Navajo Nation, however, figures indicate that the program has constructed less than 100 homes.

BFC chair Council Delegate Seth Damon (Bááháálí, Chichiltah, Manuelito, Tsé Lichíí, Rock Springs, Tsayatoh) said he has “no faith” that the Office of the President and Vice President will develop a strategy to address the audit findings and that he does not have confidence that the Veterans Administration will be able to construct enough new homes within one year to meet the goal of producing a total of 300 new homes.

BFC member Council Delegate Tom Chee (Shiprock) urged the Office of the President and Vice President to hire a permanent director for the Veterans Administration as soon as possible.

“An acting director will not get the job done,” said Delegate Chee. “An acting director is simply there to do ‘house keeping’ so there needs to be a permanent director hired soon.”

Prior to voting on the legislation, the BFC members approved a second amendment that requires that a fund management plan be established in coordination with the corrective action plan. The amendment passed by a vote of 5-0.

Budget and Finance Committee members voted 3-2 in support of Legislation No. 0258-17. The Navajo Nation Council serves as the final authority for the bill.

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