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Resources and Development Committee tables legislation for the Grand Canyon Escalade Project

BODAWAY/GAP, Ariz. – On Wednesday, the Resources and Development Committee considered Legislation No. 0293-16, which seeks to approve the master agreement for the development of the Grand Canyon Escalade Project and approve the funding application in the amount of \$65 million for the development of the offsite infrastructure for the project.

The legislation will also authorize the Navajo Nation Hospitality Enterprise to enter into a development and operating agreement with the Confluence Partners LLC, approve covenant not to compete, waive certain provisions of Title 7 Section 1101 and 1118 of the Navajo Nation Code, and accept the approval of the land withdrawal in the Bodaway/Gap Chapter.

RDC vice chair Council Delegate Benjamin L. Bennett (Crystal, Fort Defiance, Red Lake, Sawmill), who sponsored the legislation stated, “This is a very hard legislation and I know that a lot of our Navajo leaders don’t want to deal with it. This legislation addresses the concept of planning for our Navajo people and our children’s future. The Nation’s budget is decreasing and we must take it upon ourselves to make alternative plans to carry our Nation forward. This legislation speaks to that.”

The proposed project would consist of a Navajoland Discovery Center, Tramway, river walk, specialty retail stores, restaurants, artist in residence studios, vendor markets, tourism information center, rim trails, entertainment lawn, public safety office, hotels, gas station, RV park and provide water lines, roads, electric services, sewer treatment plant, and communications for the area, according to Confluence Partners LLC agent and former Arizona Rep. Albert Hale.

“Nation faces shrinking revenues from nonrenewable coal, oil and gas, and federal funding. The Escalade Project can recover those dollars lost,” added Delegate Bennett.

RDC member Council Delegate Jonathan Perry (Becenti, Crownpoint, Huerfano, Lake Valley, Nageezi, Nahodishgish, Tse’ii’ahi, Whiterock) raised questions regarding the chapter’s support and public safety concerns.

“I don’t see the chapter’s community land use plan in the legislation. Is the Escalade Project included in the plans of the community?” asked Delegate Perry, “I also didn’t see any plans to address public safety and emergency management. Our Nation is short staffed on law

enforcement and emergency management and the local communities are not equipped to handle huge developments like the Escalade Project. If an emergency occurs near the project, who will respond to the emergency? Addressing safety should always be a priority.”

According to the Grand Canyon Escalade briefing book prepared by the Confluence Partners LLC, phase one of development includes the construction of a public safety facility that would consist of a security center, medial response center and adjacent helipad.

RDC member Council Delegate Walter Phelps (Cameron, Coalmine Canyon, Leupp, Tolani Lake, Tside To ii) stated that the Grand Canyon Escalade Project may provide an economic opportunity for the Nation, but said it requires more input from community members.

“I agree that our Nation needs economic development and job creation. This project is an opportunity to address those issues but it would need careful planning without debates and disagreements. I think this opportunity will be in the near future, not today, but in the future. The right thing to do is do a community referendum. We need to see what the community members think about this,” said Delegate Phelps.

RDC chair Council Delegate Alton Joe Shepherd (Jeddito, Cornfields, Ganado, Kin Dah Lichíí, Steamboat) also agreed that the decision regarding the Grand Canyon Escalade Project should come from the local community.

“I believe that it is the people’s choice. The \$65 million request for the project is the people’s money. We need to conduct public hearings before a decision is made. The chapter’s community land use plan also needs to be recertified before a major decision,” stated Delegate Shepherd.

According to former Rep. Hale, the Confluence Partners LLC will contribute \$162 million to develop and construct the phase one improvements and the Nation could contribute up to \$63 million to develop and construct all roads and utilities for the proposed site.

Newly elected Bodaway/Gap Chapter president Raymond Don Yellowman stated that the community should be highly involved and educated on the proposed project.

“There has been no public education regarding the project. Community members need to know the concept of ecotourism and industrial tourism before the project is approved. There were no open discussions at the chapter about the project and we feel excluded,” stated Yellowman following the committee meeting.

Delegate Phelps recommended the Confluence Partners provide more information regarding the Master Agreement with the Nation.

The RDC tabled the legislation with a 3-2 vote. The bill moves forward to the Budget and Finance Committee.

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