



## Reopening of Grand Canyon National Park, tribal parks, and local business reports heard by Resources and Development Committee

**FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE:** February 16, 2021

**WINDOW ROCK, Ariz.** — The Resources and Development Committee (RDC) of the 24th Navajo Nation Council received reports regarding coronavirus (Covid-19) pandemic impacts on the US National Parks Service's (NPS) reopening plans for the Grand Canyon National Park's (GCNP) east entrance, the status of Navajo Nation tribal parks and nearby Navajo-owned hotels during their regular meeting Wednesday.

In the first report, GCNP Superintendent Edward Keable relayed the NPS currently plans to reopen its eastern park entrance on May 21.

"Keeping safety in mind, we are not committed to this date and want to be good neighbors by incorporating the Navajo Nation's interests in our plans," said Keable.

Members of the RDC presented their concerns for the safety of both Navajo Nation residents and Grand Canyon tourists during a possible reopening. Navajo Nation Department of Health (NDOH) Executive Director Dr. Jill Jim and Office of President and Vice President (OPVP) Deputy Chief of Staff Milton Bluehouse, Jr. also joined the meeting to inform Keable of current pandemic conditions on the Navajo Nation regarding a recent curfew order change.

"The purpose of our current health order is to expand the vaccine distribution and contribute to the Navajo Nation's economic recovery plan. But, it is a balancing act and a race against time," said Bluehouse.

Bluehouse indicated the Navajo Nation leads the country in vaccine distributions with over 2,000 Navajos being vaccinated on the weekend of Feb. 6 alone. The Health Command Operations Center (HCOC), under guidance from Dr. Jim, is focused on staying ahead of a possible third Covid-19 positive case surge with new variants of the virus reported in surrounding states.

Council Delegate Herman Daniels, Jr. (Ts'ah Bii' Kin, Navajo Mountain, Shonto, Oljato) cautioned the committee about the health risks of hastily reopening public places after recalling an outbreak that affected businesses in Goulding, Utah.

Lester Tsosie, superintendent of the Bureau of Indian Affairs (BIA) Eastern Navajo Agency, was called on to explain how businesses near the Navajo Nation, like those in Goulding, often encounter Navajo land jurisdictional issues that overlap.

"In Goulding, people travel through Navajo trust land because of businesses and that affects our local businesses. That is something to keep in mind with National Parks bordering the Navajo Nation as well," said RDC Chair Rickie Nez (T'iistsoh Sikaad, Nenahnezad, Upper Fruitland, Tsé Daa K'aan, Newcomb, San Juan).

Nez and Council Delegate Mark Freeland (Becenti, Lake Valley, Náhodishgish, Standing Rock, Whiterock, Huerfano, Nageezi, Crownpoint) both called for a future work session to communicate Navajo priorities with the NPS that would include OPVP, the Navajo Nation Historical Preservation Department (HPD), the Navajo Nation Division of Natural Resources (DNR) and the Navajo Nation Parks and Recreation Department.

Keable concurred and indicated he would bring Grand Canyon Tribal Liaison Mike Lyndon to the meeting and maintain contact.

The next report was provided by Parks and Recreation Manager Martin Begaye who provided an overview on the department's response to security enforcement and economic challenges during the Covid-19 pandemic.

"The Navajo Nation is not completely shut down and we still see a lot of traffic and people trying to enter our parks on weekends and after hours," said Begaye. "We have rangers patrolling and sitting at the gates, but people still find ways in."

With the Navajo Nation under a level-red declaration red, the highest Covid-19 concentration-code level, Begaye said many in-person services, such as tours, have been canceled. Consequently, 15 to 20 of the 75 department staff have lost their jobs or have been furloughed.

Dr. Jim explained the HCOC's data-driven approach to creating gating criteria for determining the Navajo Nation's Covid-19 code levels involves an evaluation of the number of positive Covid-19 cases and other factors related to the spread of the virus. Although Covid-19 numbers have gone down, Navajo tribal parks are not able to open until the Navajo Nation is in the orange phase.

"I am sure individuals like Mr. Begaye receive a lot of criticism, considering the dire impact that Covid-19 is having on our people and economy. But he, too, is doing his best to protect the public by following the health command oversight," said Nez.

"These are our very own Navajo business owners and here they are doing their best to keep afloat while serving the surrounding communities, their families and their employees," said Council Delegate Thomas Walker, Jr. (Birdsprings, Leupp, Tolani Lake, Coalmine Canyon, Cameron).

The last report was relayed by The View Hotel owner Amanda Ortega of Monument Valley. As a Navajo business owner, Ortega explained the financial challenges she and her staff have experienced since the pandemic began in March 2020.

The View also runs a gift shop and restaurant that employ approximately 130 individuals who are mostly local Navajo citizens.

"Many of my employees have nothing. Unemployment has run out and I have seen so many get their vehicles reposed," added Ortega. "We've had to sell everything in the hopes that we can reopen as soon as the Navajo Nation goes Orange."

Nez recalled witnessing a Navajo family lose their truck in New Mexico and suggested a work session with the Navajo Nation Department of Justice (DOJ) be held to address the Navajo Nation's protections from such seizure laws.

Ortega indicated the Monument Valley Tribal Park previously received over 150,000 visitors annually. She said The View had to refund \$2.5 million in September 2020 after they were forced to close.

As a result, Ortega said her business struggles to uphold their commitments to helping veterans and tour companies while paying monthly utilities, debt payments and other investment obligations.

“While the border town businesses are thriving, our people are having to choose between an electric bill and their dinner and I feel for them,” said Freeland. “We need to take more steps to consider phase plans to rebuild our economy. This virus has killed so many dreams and many of these businesses are closing for good.”

Council Delegate Kee Allen Begay Jr. (Tachee/Blue Gap, Many Farms, Nazlini, Tselani/Cottonwood, Low Mountain) reissued the call for a work session to address economic challenges as the Covid-19 pandemic continues.

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