

Executive Branch leadership meets with chapters affected by U.S. 89 closure



Navajo Nation President Ben Shelly met with chapters affected by the closure of U.S. 89 on Feb. 24, 2013, at Gap Chapter. Shelly signed a Declaration of Emergency sponsored by the Navajo Nation Commission on Emergency Management. (Photo by Rick Abasta)

BODAWAY GAP-Community members met with leadership from the Navajo Nation Executive Branch Feb. 24 to discuss the impact of the road closure on U.S. 89.

Navajo Nation President Ben Shelly said he signed a declaration of emergency to address the issues faced by chapters in the area.

"Arizona Department of Transportation is conducting assessments on the damage to determine how to fix it and the cost of repairs," Shelly said in

Navajo.

The chapter house was filled with Navajo elders from the local communities.

Shelly said the road would be closed for at least eight months and directed Navajo Division of Transportation to work with the Bureau of Indian Affairs to begin maintaining Navajo Route 20, a 28-mile dirt road stretching from Bodaway-Gap to LeChee.

"This road belongs to the State of Arizona. They have a 150-foot wide right-of-way and everything within is their juris-

dition," Shelly said. "Outside that boundary belongs to the Navajo Nation and is NDOT's responsibility."

Navajo Nation Vice President Rex Lee Jim said speculations arose after the road collapse about a possible earthquake.

"It was not an earthquake. It was a rock slide," Jim explained in Navajo.

He said the president asked him to answer the people's questions about what to do culturally when such an event occurs.

"You probably have elders out here in the community. We will defer to them and ask for guidance," Jim said.

He noted that most traditional Navajos believe discussions of unforeseen disasters occurring should not be allowed because it would be tantamount to willing it to occur.

"But if we're not prepared, rumors can spread and cause panic and fear," Jim said.

He said there's opportunity with adversity and encouraged community members to care for one another and look after their elders.

Chief of staff Arbin Mitchell spoke in Navajo and explained the declaration of emergency from the Navajo Nation Commission on Emergency Management.

He said their responsibility is to determine if specific events qualified for emergency status for legislation to be crafted and moved forward to the federal government.

Mitchell said the emergency declaration covered community concerns from the road closure in the areas of emergency medical services, transport of school kids, employees working in Page, and the economic impact on Navajo vendors and stores in the area.

"It's all a part of this declaration the president signed. What happened with this road is going to hurt people in these areas," Mitchell said.

Although a disaster occurred, he said it's an opportunity to finish paving N20.

The maintenance of N20 was a major concern for the Bodaway-Gap Chapter Vice President Gvern Begay.

Begay said, "(The road closure) going to affect and impact not only Coppermine, but Bodaway, LeChee, Cameron, Tuba City, and Coal Mine."

She said when the road collapse occurred she was in Flagstaff attending orientation for new chapter officials. The newly elected officials then convened and drafted a resolution declaring an emergency.

Coppermine Chapter Vice President Lola Smith said her constituents were thankful for action from the Navajo Nation Executive Branch.

"You are aware of our needs," Smith said.

She said the detour has increased the distance workers have to travel to get to Page. It also puts a strain on students that have to travel rough roads for long distances to get school.

"They actually have to get up at five o'clock in the morning to be able to be at school on time," Smith said. "It actually affects over 200 students."

NDOT Director Paulson Chaco responded to concerns and said road graders from the BIA and Coconino County are already on N20 performing services.

"U.S. 89 is the responsibility of ADOT, that road belongs to them. For us, it's N20 and it's a priority," Chaco said.

He said the NDOT Department of Roads has taken the

lead role in road maintenance activities and invited department manager Ray Russell to give a status report to the community.

“We have created an action plan. Since Tuesday, we started assisting BIA Roads Department on N20, Russell said. “We put up electric signage stating ‘No Heavy Trucks, Local Traffic Only.’”

He said NDOT will be working with the BIA to schedule grading activities on N20 at least two times a month or more for six to eight months.

“A year ago, Coppermine requested an intergovernmental agreement with Coconino Coun-

plaining that U.S. 89 has 3,100 vehicles a day traveling through the corridor from Bitter Springs to Page.

“It has 16 percent truck traffic and that amounts to about 500 trucks a day going through there,” Becenti said.

His information was based on statistical data published by ADOT in 2010.

Because of the large volume of heavy trucks, he said N20 would only be open to local traffic only because of safety reasons.

“I know trucks will get stuck, I know RVs will get stuck,” Becenti said.



Navajo Division of Transportation Director Paulson Chaco said NDOT crews are currently assisting the BIA and Coconino County with road maintenance activities on Navajo Route 20, stretching from Bodaway-Gap to LeChee. Chaco said NDOT executed an IGA with Coconino County over a year ago, earmarking \$250,000 for road maintenance of N20 by the county. (Photo by Rick Abasta)

“ When you go to Page Walmart, who’s working there? Navajos. When you go to Page School District, who do you see teaching? Navajos. ”

ty to maintain N20. \$250,000 was earmarked by NDOT, that’s how the county came out to start maintaining the road,” Chaco said.

Sara Dale, vice president of LeChee Chapter, was adamant about getting assistance for community members affected by the road closure.

“When you go to Page Walmart, who’s working there? Navajos. When you go to Page School District, who do you see teaching? Navajos. When you go to the dam, who assists you there? Navajos. And the Navajo Generating Station, who works there? Navajos,” Dale said.

BIA Western Navajo Agency Road Engineer Roland Becenti said the bureau understands the implications of the closure.

A resident of Tuba City, Becenti said he’s very familiar with N20 and all the surrounding routes.

“We don’t want the BIA roads as a detour,” he said, ex-

He lauded the efforts of NDOT working with the BIA for road improvements in the area. Both NDOT and the BIA will be meeting with ADOT this week to discuss the road closure and possible improvements for N20.

“We want the Navajo Nation as a partner and we want to know what the Navajo Nation thinks,” Becenti said. “The decision is not entirely BIA’s decision, but we’re part of the solution.”

Information:
www.navajodot.org

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Road maintenance activities continue on Navajo Route 20, a dirt road connecting Bodaway-Gap and LeChee. NDOT is working with crews from the BIA and Coconino County on maintaining this stretch of road for local traffic use for the next eight months to a year, until U.S. 89 is repaired by ADOT. (Photo by Rick Abasta)