Tribal, state, federal officials break ground for N20 paving construction

For the past three months, ADOT has been conducting geotechnical analysis to repair the roadway and diverted traffic for Page through U.S. 160 and State Route 98, an additional 115 miles of road to travel.

The groundbreaking ceremony at Tsinaabąąs Ha’bitin Elementary School on Sunday was a major milestone for ADOT stakeholders. Upon completion, the tribal road will provide the most direct route to Page and beyond until repairs on U.S. 89 are made.

The new detour will be designated as U.S. 89T and shaves off half the distance and time to get to Page.

“I want to thank everyone for working together these past couple of months to bring us to this day where we can begin construction on Navajo Route 20,” Shelly said.

Four days after the landslide, Shelly and staff met with community members in Bodaway-Gap to hear concerns from the affected communities. He signed an emergency declaration the same day and sent it to Arizona Governor Jan Brewer.

“I’m happy to report that the paving of N20 now stands at $35 million and will include fencing, culverts, turning lanes, and an appropriate speed limit for the safety of all.” Shelly said.

He added, “By working together, we have proven that we can complete major projects like this and improve the quality of life for our Navajo people and our Arizona and American citizens.”

The Bureau of Indian Affairs magnified the efforts from the affected Navajo communities.

“Based upon their willingness and ability to see the need for this particular road to
be built through their communities is what opened this door, is what made this come to realization,” said Sharon Pinto, regional director for BIA Navajo Region.

Tsinaabąąs Ha’bitiin (Wagon Wheel) has a new meaning, she said.

Jennifer Toth, ADOT state engineer, said transportation is very personal to the community and those that use the roads.

“U.S. 89 is not just another state highway. It’s a critical route along which children are transported to and from schools. Commuters, hard-working people use it to commute to their jobs and goods and services are delivered,” Toth said.

She echoed the sentiments of partnership and cooperation.

Toth said, “Based on my experience, I can tell you that generally road construction projects typically do not materialize in a three month time period. And a project where you’re paving 27 miles of roadway can really take years to become a reality.”

The enormity of the project was not lost on the stakeholders involved: paving a 27 mile dirt road that has needed improvement for over 40 years in a three month timeframe is not for the weak-hearted.

Since 2004, ADOT and the Navajo Nation have maintained a formal partnership and follow a standardized method of collaboration on projects and incidents related on the state roads running through tribal lands.

“Without that direct collaboration between ADOT, tribal leaders, chapter presidents, and the Navajo Division of Transportation, we wouldn’t be here today in such a quick timeframe to celebrate returning mobility to the region,” Toth said.

The federal efforts underscored improving the quality of life for motorists.

FHWA division administrator Karla Petty said the importance and urgency of the recovery efforts of the U.S. 89 landslide is recognized at the highest level of the U.S. Department of Transportation and FHWA.

“Road closures such as U.S. 89 emphasize the importance of transportation in our daily lives,” Petty said.

She explained that funding from the FHWA Emergency Relieve program provided ADOT with $37 million for U.S. 89 recovery efforts. To address immediate responses for ADOT, $2 million in quick release funds was made available, followed by $35 million for the detour.

Petty said the FHWA will secure additional funding as ADOT works towards a permanent solution for U.S. 89.

“I have traveled N20 and I do appreciate the need for an improved roadway,” Petty said. “But we would not be here today without the cooperation and partnership with the Navajo Nation, the Navajo Division of Transportation, BIA, ADOT and you, the communities.

“The spirit of teamwork is evident,” she added.

Floyd Stevens, president of Coppermine Chapter, was appreciative for the construction.

“This road has many problems. It’s dry, rough, sandy, washboard, muddy at times, and it tests the meddle of even some of the toughest drivers,” Stevens said.

Information: www.navajodot.org

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