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# THE STATE OF THE NATION

*President Ben Shelly*

*Presented to the*  
**22<sup>ND</sup> NAVAJO NATION COUNCIL**

APRIL 16, 2012

*M*r. Speaker, members of the 22nd Navajo Nation Council, Mr. President, First Lady, chapter officials, relatives, and friends, I want to say thank you to everyone here today for the opportunity to present the state of the Navajo Nation address. I also would like to acknowledge visiting federal, state, county and other tribal leaders here with us today. Most importantly, I want to thank our Code Talkers, veterans, those who still are serving in the armed forces and our own police officers for their willingness to serve and protect.

The state of the Navajo Nation is strong and will continue to grow even stronger. The word "strength" is embedded in our prayers, songs, and teachings. "Adziil" is at the core of "dzil," which is the foundation of the Sacred Mountain Bundles that we have. We must use this collective strength to once again endure these tough times of reduced federal and state budget cuts.

We also know that our strength comes from the wisdom of our people, wherever they may be, at home, at work, in school, or right here with us in the gallery. Their thoughts are important to our administration. In the spirit of transparency and accountability, we have taken certain initiatives before our people for their ideas and concerns. Let me provide some examples.

Most recently, Council Delegate Dwight Witherspoon, in cooperation with our administration, has presented the Navajo Nation Sales Tax Distribution Reform Act of 2012, at several town hall style meetings.

In coordination with the Navajo Nation Tax Commission, additional funds of new revenue would be created for Navajo scholarships, and economic development and natural resource assessments and policy.

Most recently, the Navajo Nation Office of Scholarship and Financial Assistance released information from 2010 stating that about 17,000 students applied for scholarships and only about 9,000 applicants were funded, leaving 8,000 students to find other sources to fund their schooling.

The new funding could create funding for 1,000 more students if they were to receive \$2,000 a semester.

We know this proposal meets a small portion of the needs of our children, but when it comes to our children, we must invest in them and their future because they are our future.



How can we better the Navajo Nation for the upcoming generations if we don't invest in the knowledge and education of our children?

Honorable Witherspoon's legislation secures an investment into our future. Just as our parents and grandparents cared for us, we must do the same for our children. It is now our time to provide for our children.

Providing scholarships is only one way this administration is working for our children.

For years and prior to this administration, Navajo Nation Head Start has been trying to regain its footing and match numbers of those when the Administration of Children and Families closed our program in 2006 because of deficiencies and noncompliance findings. Since that time, the program has tried to regain the same level of students.

At that time, Head Start had more than 3,600 students, but now only about 2,100 students are enrolled in our Head Start and Early Head Start centers and the issues regarding Head Start are vast.

Our Navajo Head Start program has to adhere to more than 2,800 federal regulations pertaining to Head Start. The overly comprehensive standards monitor everything from refrigerator temperatures to the safety of the facilities and buses. Non-compliance with only one Federal Head Start standard will make the entire program non-compliant.

When the program's funding was threatened to be reduced from \$29 million to nearly \$15 million last summer, we contacted federal leaders in Washington, D.C. We were able to maintain funds for this entire school. There will continue to be Head Start services.

Eventually, our efforts brought forth a February government-to-government consultation with George Sheldon, Acting Secretary for the Administration of Children and Families, and Head Start Director Yvette Sanchez Fuentes. The consultation was held in Window Rock.

This meeting was a first of its kind for both governments. We secured our program's funding for upcoming fiscal years and we have three years to restructure our Head Start program. The work we do now will depend on how much the Navajo Head Start program wants to maintain its services and work hard to change it. Change is hard, but it has to be done to save the program.

But more importantly, the leadership from Washington, D.C., also saw first hand the difficulties our Head Start centers experience. They saw how some of their standards are difficult for our program to be in compliance with, given the vastness of our homeland.

On our side, we have brought on Community Development Institute, a national non-profit organization that specializes in rebuilding Head Start programs.

With CDI's help, we are going to rebuild our Head Start program from the ground up. All positions will be re-evaluated and for the first time in recent history, federal building officials will evaluate all the opened and closed classrooms throughout the reservation. We will generate the true cost for repairs, maintenance, or replacement of our Head Start and Early Head Start facilities. We can no longer risk the future of our youngest children by continuing to do a 'Band-Aid' fix for the problems within Head Start. This long-term work will be challenging, but it has to be done.

We know how precious our youngest children are and they will continue our Diné way of life.

The Navajo Head Start program is nearing completion of content to teach home-based Navajo Head Start students Navajo language.



Shiyazhi Dine K'ehji Hadoozihi' curriculum will allow our home based Head Start students to learn Navajo at an early age. Some of the formats used to teach Navajo are lesson booklets, activity booklets, an instructional guide for home visitors to teach parents Navajo, instructional guides for parents to teach their children Navajo, and story booklets.

The curriculum is finishing the graphic designing then it will go to print and be available to our children.

Again, I can't emphasize enough the value our children have. We must provide avenues for them to learn language and culture and to be successful in this modern day.

But as we talk about that the educational and cultural well being of our children, their health is equally as important.

We are pleased that as a result of our collective lobbying efforts, Arizona Gov. Jan Brewer's waiver regarding tribal Medicaid and Medicare programs was approved in Washington.

Last year, due to the \$1 billion deficit in the Arizona state budget, Gov. Brewer proposed cutbacks on Medicare and Medicaid programs for the state. However, she included a portion that would keep funding for Arizona tribes in tact, essentially waiving tribes from her proposed spending cuts.

Thankfully, our Medicare and Medicaid funding through the Arizona Health Care Cost Containment System (AHCCCS) will remain intact, which could've cost our IHS and 638 health care facilities about \$27 million. So our health services through Indian Health Service and our 638 health care facilities may continue to provide health care without any financial setbacks.

For our people, this waiver also means keeping the doors of health care open for 50,000 Navajo people enrolled in AHCCCS.

And as we look ahead into our near future, we are in the midst of building the Kayenta Alternative Rural Hospital in Kayenta. The hospital will replace the IHS ambulatory clinic.

This project has created 15 Navajo jobs for construction of the \$150 million health facility and when complete will have 429 jobs available for health care professionals. Of the 429 jobs, 189 of those will be new jobs.

The Kayenta Alternative Rural Hospital will offer services for 19,000 members for 15 different communities. The hospital will provide ambulatory, 3 bed birthing center, 24-hour emergency, 10 bed short stay nursing unit, and community health care. Most importantly, the new hospital will provide health care to a Navajo communities, which will help save lives.

And as we look ahead, in efforts to create a healthier lifestyle, we are planning a 2012 Navajo Nation Food Policy Summit.

With more than 40 percent of our Navajo people considered to be obese, we must work to help keep our Nation healthy. Obesity is a factor that can lead to cardio-vascular disease, diabetes, heart attacks and other various chronic diseases.

The summit, scheduled for May, will provide a space for meaningful discussions to not only address this health issue, but to develop policy strategies to reduce the prevalence and incidence of obesity. Since only certain kinds of foods consumed are a major contributor to this problem, the summit will put food in its proper Navajo traditional context.

The summit will explore the spiritual and nutritional role in a historical perspective and current research studies, data and medical perspectives will be discussed. Based on these two perspectives, both Traditional and Western, participants will recommend policies, program development and implementation, and assist in the creation of an infrastructure to continue to address this major health problem.



We need a healthy Nation because our people are the lifeblood and strength of this Nation.

Likewise, the health of our sacred mountains is imperative to our Nation. The Ninth Circuit Court decision in February to allow reclaimed wastewater to be used on the San Francisco Peaks hasn't ended our efforts to protect our sacred mountain to the west.

I assure you that we are doing all we can to keep the integrity of our culture, our songs, our prayers by exploring every avenue to stop any use of reclaimed wastewater. Right now, we are working with the United Nations and exploring how the United Nations Declarations on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples can work to our advantage to keep our cultural well being strong.

We are also starting to examine the needs of our people in the former Bennett Freeze area. For 40 years life stood still as a federal order was in place suspending development of nearly 1.5 million acres in the Tuba City area, but now, nearly three years after President Barack Obama signed a law that repealed the freeze, we have little to no development for our people in these areas.

We are meeting with our people in these areas so we can come up with a working solution that will help our government meet the needs of our people.

As the health of our people and their communities is important to this administration, the financial health of our government is important too.

We are fortunate that we have the ability to live on this beautiful land. Many other tribes are not on their ancestral lands. We are fortunate that we have renewable and non-renewable resources to assist the Navajo Nation's budget. We also have the ability to tax ourselves within the Navajo Nation boundaries. We have created enterprises where we are the owners, like NTUA, NECA, Arts and Crafts, and Navajo Nation Oil and Gas. We will be looking at ways to increase our general funds using our enterprises. Right now NECA is set up to always provide a portion of their profits for scholarships. I challenge all other enterprises to set themselves up in this same manner.

More and more, we have to look to ourselves, the Navajo Nation to support ourselves. If we continually look to the federal government for funding, we know that we will only see decreases in the future. One way we can strengthen our sovereignty, if by becoming financially independent. We can still hold the federal government to meet treaty obligations, but we also need stand on our own like our elders teach us, t'aa aho'o'ajit'eego. This is one of the reasons we have to protect our Undesignated Unreserved Fund Balance as much as possible. We will use the UUFb for important projects that will benefit the youth, a majority of the Navajo people, and our traditional ways of life.

Finally, as we experience this time of a different Navajo government for our people, we have been tasked with enormous decisions.

We have been tasked with many large decisions and projects that have not been addressed for many years. We have taken on issues that deal with the health, safety and well being of the Navajo people. These issues don't have one answer and an easy fix, there many things to weigh when decisions are made.

For years and decades, we have closed our eyes to some key issues that affect our people and now this administration is taking on some of them and finding solutions that work. These issues are complex, so their solution isn't simple.

Since 2008 the state of Utah has been wanting the Navajo Nation to address the Utah Navajo Trust Fund issue. The trust fund has grown to more than \$40 million because the fund



doesn't have an active trustee. We have been and are listening to our Utah Navajos for solutions to this.

Since before 2006, the Navajo Head Start program has been in need of major improvements, and we have shared a few of the ways the program will be rebuilt. And now, a complicated issue that has been ongoing since 1979, has come to our table, the table of the Navajo Nation and its leaders, and we must consider a proposed solution.

We have been asked to consider settling our claims to water on the Little Colorado River Basin.

U.S. Senator Jon Kyl introduced the Navajo-Hopi Little Colorado River Water Rights Settlement Act before Congress in February. The act will authorize the United States to execute a settlement agreement resolving the legal claims by the Hopi Tribe and the Navajo Nation to all sources of water in the Little Colorado River Basin in Northern Arizona.

Two weeks ago, a few of us met with Sen. Kyl and Sen. John McCain and we discussed the act and the agreement.

Senators Kyl and McCain told us, they will NOT move forward with the bill in Congress unless the Navajo Nation and the Hopi Tribe support the bill.

This is a very difficult matter.

With this settlement, the Navajo Nation will have unlimited use of the C-aquifer. Additionally, if there is no Little Colorado River Water Rights Settlement Act, there will be no funds and no development of the Leupp-Dilkon, Ganado Groundwater Projects, and other projects.

We told the senators the approval of this legislation rests in the hand of our people. So beginning tomorrow, we are going to start holding forums about the water settlement.

We are going to present facts. Yes, settling water rights can be scary, but we must think about the alternative of no settlement, which includes having the Arizona state court deciding our water rights for us.

In this settlement, we get unlimited use of the Little Colorado River and C-Aquifer. In a state court decision, they may not give us unlimited use, and they will not provide any funds for the water projects.

I know, people have said we are giving up our rights with this agreement, but we are not. We are exercising our sovereignty and rights to create the possibility of bringing water to our People for our future generations.

Meanwhile, our People have wells that are drying up, our people continue to haul water and most importantly, our people with livestock and fields have limited access to water.

There are many facets we can debate and talk about in this settlement, but I humbly ask that everyone please keep an open mind.

As our Navajo Nation look forward, we only see great things. But we have a long way to go. For years, our people have not trusted our government, so I ask each one of us, what are we doing to change that?

I know from our Executive and Legislative Summit held last month, we came together as leaders for our people to find common ground for real solutions to better our Navajo Nation. Our people are the reason we are here and we must never forget that.

And at the same time, we are called leaders because we are expected to lead our people in times of need. We have to make tough decisions and create real solutions. We are trying very hard and we must do better.



Our administration will continue to reach out to the Navajo Nation Council to accomplish more for our people.

Our relatives are our strength, and we, as leaders, we must lead our people to greater prosperity and opportunities, while keeping our culture alive and strong.

We must preserve our land as our elders did, and at the same time, it is a resource that supports our people.

That is a delicate balance.

We must walk that fine line of preservation and development.

What I have talked about today are ways we are walking that delicate balance.

Thank you for listening and for your support of some of these initiatives. If we work together we can keep and preserve our way of life.

With your faith, hope and prayers, may we again as tribal leaders continue to strengthen our balance and path to for the Navajo people.

Thank you for your service to our People and may beauty surround us all.