Gov. Martinez announces $78 million funding for U.S. Route 491

SHEEP SPRINGS, N.M. — It was a celebration.

Although there was no groundbreaking, no ribbon cutting or any other ceremony indicative of celebration, the announcement by New Mexico Gov. Susana Martinez that four-lane highway construction for the completion of U.S. Route 491 improvements would be funded was enough cause for celebration.

On the Tuesday afternoon, a crowd of 50-plus people gathered alongside U.S. Route 491 while commercial trucks and other vehicles sped by. A makeshift stage on a tractor-trailer bed faced an audience seated on folding chairs.

Navajo Nation President Ben Shelly was the first speaker and he began by giving recognition to Sen. John Pinto.

“I’d like to start by recognizing the hard work and dedication of a man that made the four-lane construction of U.S. Route 491 a priority in his service to the State and the Navajo Nation: Senator John Pinto,” President Shelly said.

He said Sen. Pinto got the ball rolling for the four-lane construction on U.S. Route 491, which was formerly named U.S. 666 and called the “Devil’s Highway” because of the large number of fatalities on the road.

President Shelly also thanked Gov. Martinez for her commitment to working with the Navajo people, which he said was “unquestionable.” He presented a letter of appreciation for her recent approval of capital outlay funding to the Navajo Nation.

He recalled how the importance of U.S. Route 491 was underscored back on July 5, 2013, when a portion of the road between Naschitti and Sheep Springs was closed after heavy flooding damaged a portion of the roadway.

“The rest of the country quickly realized how vital this road is to travel in the Four Corners region,” he said.

Sen. Pinto spoke next and was assisted to the podium by Gov. Martinez.

He gave thanks for those in attendance and recalled how he and others began advocating for widening the roadway more
President Shelly first acknowledged the dedicated efforts of Sen. John Pinto in his unending quest to have U.S. Route 491's four-lane construction completed. He recounted reporting before the New Mexico Transportation Commission in 2007, along with Sen. Pinto, to request funding for the highway. (Photo by Rick Abasta)

Sen. John Pinto said he spent the past 20 years lobbying and advocating for the four-lane construction of U.S. Route 491. He expressed sadness for the many lives lost on the roadway and said with the completion of construction, that perhaps now the destruction will end. (Photo by Rick Abasta)

With over 21 years experience in the state transportation department, N.M. Department of Transportation Cabinet Secretary Tom Church said during his entire career, he’s heard the state promise that construction of the roadway in northwestern New Mexico would be completed. He was proud to announce Gov. Martinez’s decision to finish the road. (Photo by Rick Abasta)