



Joint Press Release

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Navajo Nation leaders reach unprecedented agreement on priorities

CHURCHROCK, N.M.—The Navajo Nation branch chiefs and the 23rd Navajo Nation Council met on June 27 at Fire Rock Navajo Casino and hammered out a priority listing for the tribal government to share nationally and internationally.

Nine priorities were outlined, with particular emphasis on water rights/projects and economic development, and infrastructure. Other areas included were housing, education, human services, governance, public safety, natural resources and judicial needs.

President Russell Begaye, Vice President Jonathan Nez, Speaker LoRenzo Bates and acting Chief Justice Eleanor Shirley spoke on the needs of the Navajo people. It was a follow up to the meeting held weeks earlier at Twin Arrows, where the Executive and Legislative Branches agreed it was imperative to include the Judicial Branch in the discussions.

“We are looking at a six-percent shortfall across the board and we’re going to make sure we have adequate funding, especially for the priority areas,” said President Begaye.

He expressed the need for the tribe to establish property taxes and other sustainable revenues that will revive the economic health of the Navajo Nation, aside from the volatile funding sources derived from gas, oil and coal.

“How do we show that we can raise revenue that is sustainable on the Navajo Nation and not rely heavily on volatile revenue? We need to have this larger discussion,” President Begaye said.

Speaker LoRenzo Bates (Nenahnezad, Newcomb, San Juan, Tiis Tsoh Sikaad, Tse’Daa’Kaan, Upper Fruitland) hosted the meeting and restated that the Council has emphasized the need for the Nation to be united to move its initiatives and to lobby effectively.

“As I previously stated, the three branches need to communicate and have honest discussions on a regular basis in order for our government to make real progress,” said Speaker Bates.

Council members also issued several recommendations including adding uranium issues under the nine priorities and developing a new and more effective annual budget process that will help to meet the needs of the people.

Vice President Jonathan Nez said the creation of an OPVP workgroup to research infrastructure will provide the Council recommendations on policy, structure or law changes that are needed. He cited the need for such changes with Division of Community Development, Division of Economic Development, Office of Management and Budget and Office of the Controller as examples.

“The \$554 million is available, but how do we keep those dollars on Navajo? That should be the overall goal for us because we don’t want it to flow off the Nation,” Vice President Nez said. “We’ll be in the same social, economic condition after these new facilities are built.”

Acting Chief Justice Eleanor Shirley presented several priorities on Saturday, including the need for legislative support to assist in funding for new judicial facilities to replace dilapidated judicial buildings that pose health and safety risks for judicial employees. Additionally, the presentation highlighted other areas of need such as improvements to the restorative justice or peacemaking program.

The Council directed Speaker Bates to hold the leadership meetings with the purpose of aligning the Nation’s priorities and to re-establish relations between the tribal branches of government to advocate and lobby on behalf of the Navajo people for funding from the county, state and federal levels.

President Begaye said that he is in agreement with the nine priorities, which encompass the four pillars of his administration: Navajo veterans, elders and youth, infrastructure and job creation. He added that the division directors within his administration now have their “marching orders” to begin aligning their respective programs with the priorities.

The nine priorities were established based off of the priorities identified at the chapter level, President Begaye’s administration, the Council’s standing committees, and public comments received last year during public hearings held to gain input as to how the Nation’s \$554 million trust settlement award should be used and/or invested.

“Working and communicating together will make our Nation much stronger internally and at all other levels of government,” added Speaker Bates, adding that the three branches will continue to hold meetings on a regular basis to move the Nation’s agenda forward.

Near the conclusion of the meeting, the three branches agreed to sign a written agreement in the near future that outlines the nine priorities.