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Vice President Nez Joins Council to Hear Concerns of Bennett Freeze Residents



Top, Vice President Jonathan Nez provided the opening address and said the Office of the President and Vice President will work closely with Council to address the former Bennett Freeze area. Bottom, residents of the Bennett Freeze listen intently to the discussions. (Photos by Rick Abasta)

TUBA CITY, Ariz.— *Woli beę ádaht'í.* We are trying really hard is what residents of the former Bennett Freeze area told tribal leaders recently.

The people affected by the former Bennett Freeze area want homes that are resistant to the elements and have the modern day

conveniences like walk-in closets.

This was revealed during the Naabik'iyati' meeting in Tuba City on Sept. 24 at the Grey Hills Academy Auditorium. Hundreds filled the facility to listen to the discussions from the Office of the President and Vice President, 23rd

Navajo Nation Council, and residents directly impacted by the freeze.

Navajo Nation Vice President Jonathan Nez attended the meeting and began by thanking the tribal council for passing the FY 2016 budget.

With the former Bennett Freeze area development, Vice President Nez said the Executive and Legislative branches are again working together to address a black eye on the face of the Nation's history for more than 40 years.

"It's time we sit down, listen, strategize and begin developing a plan of action to address the Bennett Freeze," Vice President Nez said.

He said the countless studies on the area need to be dusted off and consolidated into one document.

"Then we'll put it on the table and discuss the development. President Begaye and I directed our staff to get those plans ready to present before the Council. That's the purpose of our meeting today," he said.

Don Yellowman, a representative from the

Forgotten People, began discussions with an outline of the Declaration of the Foundation of Dine' Law.

"This is who we are as a people, the foundation," he said.

Joe Ellis, a 90-year-old Navajo resident of Coalmine said he did not understand what the officials meant when they told him the land was "frozen."

"It seems that our past leaders had no idea, no interest or understanding on what we were talking about. We are holy earth people with our roots planted here," said Ellis in Navajo.

Tribal leaders and officials need to understand how these families in the affected areas think, he said, adding that he has hope in the new tribal leadership.

"I believe with all my heart, that these new leaders we selected will be the ones to handle the Bennett Freeze. I know you can do the job because you have a bilingual education," Ellis said.

His wife, Rena, spoke next and gave her account primarily in Navajo.

“There are elders here that are barely surviving. I’m speaking on their behalf and for the Navajo women. We want homes that won’t be blown over in the wind. We don’t want trailers, we want good homes,” she said.

Rena walked before all of the leaders seated in horseshoe pattern on the auditorium floor. Families with meager means pay out of pocket to build a one-bedroom structure one cinder block at a time, she said. Their kids are moving away to look for work, she added.

“I’ve been through hunger, poverty and walked along the road trying to get somewhere. We are poor. We want quality homes with a walk-in closet, where you can see your clothes and valuables stored inside. That’s what we want,” Rena said.

Eighty-year-old Cecilia Joe from Coalmine agreed with Rena and spoke of living inside tents to survive.

We’re survivors, Joe said, we were born here and were raised sleeping on sheepskin.

“I went through hunger, thirst and walking without shoes. I was raised with spankings and punishment. That’s how we were raised here. We are survivors,” Joe said in Navajo.

She said her children slept outdoors in campers or under a shade house. They woke up in morning

and went straight to school and eventually, upon graduation they left Coalmine to look for employment across the country.

“Today, I’m thinking my kids will finally have a home, a good home, just like Rena said. We want you to provide employment opportunity for our kids too, she said.

The Nabik’iyati Committee outlined a plan of action for the Bennett Freeze development and listed 33 items to begin bringing the needed infrastructure and housing to the Forgotten People after more than 40 years of struggle.

OPVP is developing a Bennett Freeze working group comprised of elected leaders from Executive and Legislative branches, local officials and affected residents to begin consolidating the Bennett Freeze studies and execution of the plan of action.

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Navajo resident Cecilia Joe said the residents of the former Bennett Freeze area are survivors of the highest caliber. She said her kids slept outside in a camper or under a shade house and upon waking up, went straight to school. (Photo by Rick Abasta)



Vice President Nez walked throughout the auditorium and spoke to residents one-on-one to gain a better perspective of what they faced with the development crisis and the resources they needed for development. Housing was the number one request. (Photo by Rick Abasta)



Wenona Benally, executive director of the Navajo-Hopi Land Commission Office, spoke about the need for Executive Branch divisions, departments and programs to come together to unite their resources and efforts on behalf of former Bennett Freeze area residents. (Photo by Rick Abasta)