FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE
July 15, 2021

President Nez and Delegate Slater advocate for transportation system improvements and policy changes with U.S. Transportation Secretary Buttigieg

PHOENIX – On Thursday, Navajo Nation President Jonathan Nez, Council Delegate Carl Slater, and Navajo Division of Transportation Executive Director Garret Silversmith were part of an Arizona tribal leadership roundtable with U.S. Sec. of Transportation Pete Buttigieg in the Gila River Indian Community, which focused on how tribal nations can work with the Biden-Harris Administration and the U.S. Department of Transportation to develop policy changes that give tribal nations more authority to improve transportation systems.

U.S. Deputy Asst. Sec. for Tribal Affairs Arlando Teller, a member of the Navajo Nation and former Arizona State Representative, facilitated the roundtable discussion that included leaders from Arizona’s 22 tribes, Congressmen Tom O’Halleran (D-AZ), Greg Stanton (D-AZ), and Ruben Gallego (D-AZ), Arizona State Legislators, and other representatives.

In his address to Sec. Buttigieg, President Nez spoke about the need to change federal regulations, policies, and requirements that stall road development projects and maintenance. In early April, President Nez had the opportunity to meet with Sec. Buttigieg and present the Nez-Lizer Administration’s transportation white paper titled, “Diné Atiin Bahane: Navajo Road Emergence,” which requests the federal government to enact seven specific policy changes to improve the Navajo Nation’s transportation system.

“I thank you, Secretary Buttigieg, for upholding the Biden-Harris Administration’s commitment to tribal nations and providing time to listen to our concerns and recommendations. Based on today’s discussion, the next step is to provide an opportunity to go before the White House Council on Native American Affairs, to present these policy changes and continue working together. We support the Biden-Harris infrastructure bill that awaits action by Congress and we
want to form a stronger partnership that allows tribes more authority to improve our own roads for our people,” said President Nez.

Over the years, the Navajo Nation has built up its capacity to administer its own transportation programs, to fulfill the self-governance agreement with the U.S. Department of Transportation, and to put forth specific policy changes that would deliver a safer and more efficient transportation system that supports economic opportunities, emergency response services, access to education, and enhance the Navajo Nation’s overall ability to be more self-sufficient in the long-term.

Delegate Slater stated that each tribe faces unique issues within their respective communities and that not all tribes are the same when it comes to the obstacles that hinder the ability to improve transportation infrastructure. He also advocated for tribes to have more authority to implement road projects while stating to Sec. Buttigieg, “Be big, and be bold on behalf of all of us.”

In total, there are currently 14,167 miles of roadway within the Navajo Nation, which includes nearly 9,400 miles of earthen roads, 1,700 miles of paved highways, approximately 179 bridges, and five airports. The Navajo Area BIA owns 42-percent of the roads, the Navajo Nation owns 34-percent, the state of Arizona owns 12-percent, and respective counties own 12-percent.

The white paper puts forth seven requests for federal agencies, the White House, and other federal government offices including:

- Resolve conflicts in agency authority and jurisdictions in order to protect our people, the environment, and indigenous cultural resources.
- Harmonize agency guidance with federal law to make Diné roads safe.
- Provide flexibility to the Tribal Priority Allocations (TPA) that the BIA uses for road maintenance so that TPA funds may also be used to fund tribal roads.
- Ensure agency practices are consistent with policies to make the Navajo road system equitable.
- Protect the integrity of tribal roads funds so that they do not subsidize non-tribal roads.
- Recognize that tribal bridges and roads present different exigencies of circumstance that require complimentary, not competitive funding sources.
- Promote tribal sovereignty by retroceding Secretarial approval over tribes who have demonstrated their own capacity for federal regulatory compliance.

# # #

For the latest news from the Office of the President and Vice President, please visit http://www.opvp.navajo-nsn.gov/ or find us on Facebook, Twitter, and Instagram.