



## *State of the Navajo Nation Address*

Navajo Nation President Jonathan Nez and Vice President Myron Lizer

Presented to the 24<sup>th</sup> Navajo Nation Council  
Summer Council Session – July 19, 2021

Yá'át'ééh to the Honorable Members of the 24<sup>th</sup> Navajo Nation Council, Speaker Seth Damon, Chief Justice JoAnn B. Jayne, as well as chapter, county, state, and federal leaders, and most importantly our Diné Citizens. On behalf of the Nez-Lizer Administration, we are pleased to present the State of the Navajo Nation Address for the 2021 Summer Council Session.

Before we begin, we want to take a moment to recognize and thank all of the men and women, including our Diné lawmakers, who took part in the horse rides over the last few days to honor the longstanding tradition of our past leaders who would travel on horseback long ago, to gather in the capital of our Nation for each Council session. We know that a lot of time, work, and resources go into the horse rides, so we thank you for honoring that tradition.

We thank the 24<sup>th</sup> Navajo Nation Council for your leadership and support throughout the COVID-19 pandemic. On March 17, 2020, the Navajo Department of Health confirmed the very first case of COVID-19 on the Navajo Nation. Sadly, we have lost the lives of 1,366 of our people since then. While the recovery and healing continue, we pray for all of the families who are grieving the loss of their loved ones.

Today, the Delta variant continues to spread throughout the country and within our own communities. As of last week, there were 11 confirmed cases of the Delta variant within the Navajo Nation. While the variants continue to pose a threat everywhere, the Navajo Nation is proud to have the highest vaccination rate anywhere in the country! We are now closer than ever to achieving community immunity – or herd immunity – with nearly 70% of

the eligible population fully vaccinated on the Navajo Nation. That is something to be proud of!

Much of the good work that is being done comes at the sacrifice of our frontline warriors – our men and women who continue to fight for us each and every day. Since the start of this pandemic, our health experts have provided us with the guidance, the data, and the resources to help protect ourselves and others.

As our Nation continues to gradually reopen to visitors and tourists, we emphasize the importance of personal responsibility. Now that the public health experts have given us the knowledge and the tools to push back on COVID-19 and the variants, we need to hold ourselves accountable for continuing to wear masks, to get vaccinated, and take precautions to prevent a major surge in new cases.

Recently, we signed legislation sponsored by the Honorable Carl Slater that rescinded several COVID-19 restrictions and allowed our Nation to reopen roads and our parks to visitors and tourists at 50% occupancy. We understand the struggles and setbacks that the pandemic has created for all Navajo people, and that includes our Navajo business owners and entrepreneurs. As we move forward with allocating funds from the American Rescue Plan Act, we request your support for additional business relief funds for Navajo businesses to help in the economic recovery effort so that businesses can continue to grow and create more jobs and revenue for our people.

We also thank the 24<sup>th</sup> Navajo Nation Council for supporting the final phase of the CARES Act Hardship Program to offer our remaining enrolled members the opportunity to receive financial relief as we move forward with recovery from the pandemic. Under the leadership of Acting Controller Elizabeth Begay, we are taking a different approach by hiring our own Navajo people to operate and oversee the final phase of this program. We thank Council Delegates Eugene Tso and Eugenia Charles Newton for sponsoring that legislation.

The legislation passed by the Council also supports the reopening of schools on the Navajo Nation, under a required School Reopening Plan and the Navajo Nation's COVID-19 Safe Schools Framework. We know that many students, teachers, and parents struggled with online school instruction

during the pandemic. Through the American Rescue Plan Act, Bureau of Indian Education schools on the Navajo Nation received \$171 million for COVID-19 relief. We need to hold the BIE accountable for informing parents, school boards, and the Navajo Nation how those funds are being used to benefit the education and safety of our Navajo students.

Vaccines are also an important part of keeping our people safe and healthy from COVID-19 and the variants. Vaccine trials are underway for children 11 years and under, so we are hopeful that the FDA will authorize a vaccine for our young people to help protect them when they return to school in the coming weeks. If or when that authorization occurs, we look to all schools across the Navajo Nation to help facilitate the vaccination of our young people on a voluntary basis.

As we move forward with recovery efforts on the Navajo Nation, we are cautiously optimistic that the worst of the pandemic is behind us. With the American Rescue Plan Act, we recognize this as a once in a lifetime opportunity to invest in water, electrical, broadband, and other infrastructure improvements and developments that will improve the quality of life for generations to come. Never before has our Nation received this amount of funding at one time from the federal government, and we likely won't see it again in our lifetime – that's the reality.

Over the last several weeks, our administration has been out in the communities meeting with local officials to hear their priorities and needs as it relates to recovery efforts. As leaders, we know what the needs are when it comes to infrastructure, facilities, bathroom additions, homes, public safety, waste management, drought mitigation, road improvements, broadband connectivity, education, mental health, and many more.

As our leaders long ago did, we must look to the future and plan for the generations to come. \$1.8 billion isn't enough to build our entire Nation, or to make everyone happy, but we can help to build our foundation and prepare it for our children and theirs to come. We have to think beyond our immediate situation and prepare for what challenges and possible future pandemics may occur.

Our people are right when they say that water is life. We see what is happening all over the southwest. We are getting less and less moisture every year, our lakes and ponds are drying up and our wells are depleting. NTUA

is now issuing protocols and asking our people to conserve water in our communities. The American Rescue Plan Act gives us the opportunity to invest in water development, water conservation, and water infrastructure to help sustain our water resources for years and generations to come.

Under the leadership of Chief of Staff Paulson Chaco, our Administration's infrastructure team is vetting projects to develop a comprehensive listing that currently includes over 9,000 projects at a cost of over \$20 billion. The Division of Community Development has also received 558 projects from chapters for the American Rescue Plan Act, most of which prioritize bathroom additions for families. The next step is to continue working together to develop a comprehensive listing.

We appreciate the introduction of the legislation to create the Navajo Nation Fiscal Recovery Fund to establish the framework and parameters for the use of the American Rescue Plan Act funds. We respectfully ask the Council to pass the legislation in its original form, so that we can continue to work together to develop a solid plan that addresses the water, electrical, broadband, housing, and other needs. As we move forward through this process of identifying priorities with the limited funding available, our administration will continue to work together with the Council, our federal partners, and our communities.

When it comes to housing, we continue to work together with members of Council to establish housing manufacturing facilities in various regions of the Navajo Nation to build homes for our people. We know the conditions that some of our elders, veterans, and others live in and we need your support to allocate funds through the American Rescue Plan Act to develop these housing manufacturing facilities to cut down on the expenses and costs to build hogan-style homes.

Under the leadership of Navajo Veterans Administration Director James Zwierlein, we have developed partnerships with organizations that specialize in housing development. We know that the cost of building materials and transportation is at an all-time high. By having regionalized housing manufacturing facilities that use our own resources and by employing our own Navajo people in the construction process, we can lower those costs

and build more homes, but we need the support of the Council to move this forward.

As members of the Council, you are aware of the road conditions in your respective communities. We know the challenges associated with moving forward with new road projects and simple road maintenance. Last Thursday, we met with U.S. Secretary of Transportation Pete Buttigieg and Deputy Assistant Secretary for Tribal Affairs Arlando Teller, to present the policy changes, requirements, and unnecessary red tape that delay road improvement projects and maintenance in our communities. Our administration has developed a Transportation White Paper that outlines specific policy changes. We should not have to wait years for right-of-way clearances and approvals from the federal government to move forward with road projects. We are, by far, the most over-regulated population in this country.

We put forth an op-ed in the Washington Post that outlines our concerns and recommendations when it comes to federal regulations, and it has captured the attention of officials in Washington D.C. So, we will be meeting with them soon to continue advocating for changes that would give more authority to our own Navajo Division of Transportation. Over the years, the Navajo Nation has built its own capacity and expertise to oversee regulations. With Congress now considering a new infrastructure bill, we need these changes to move projects forward.

As we move forward with recovery from the pandemic, there is a growing need for mental and behavioral health treatment and assistance. Having been out in the communities with our frontline warriors, we have spoken with many people who have shared their personal experiences, hardships, and ongoing issues caused by the pandemic. We hear from those who feel guilt, who have lost loved ones, and those who are dealing with the mental health issues caused by the trauma and heartache. In some communities, this is also leading to an increase in substance abuse and addiction, domestic violence, and other modern-day monsters that affect families.

Recently, the Navajo Nation Division of Social Services worked with Utah Navajo Health Systems to finalize an agreement that reopened the Gentle Ironhawk women's shelter in the state of Utah. By restarting operations, we

are confident that this will help those who are in need and lend a helping hand to our mothers, grandmothers, and sisters who need support.

With the American Rescue Plan Act, we want to continue investing in these types of community-based facilities that offer help to our people who are victims of violence and those who need mental and behavioral health support to get them back on their feet.

Those are some of the top priorities that we wanted to highlight. We know that there are many issues and many ongoing initiatives that our administration is working towards.

The Navajo Nation continues to work with the White House and U.S. Secretary of the Interior Deb Haaland to convey our support of the full restoration and expansion of the Bears Ears National Monument to 1.9 million acres. We've met with First Lady Dr. Jill Biden, White House officials, Secretary Haaland, and Assistant Secretary of Indian Affairs Bryan Newland to support the position of all tribes in this matter. We thank the 24<sup>th</sup> Navajo Nation Council, Bears Ears Inter-Tribal Coalition, and many others who are pushing forward.

We provided testimony in April before the U.S. Subcommittee on the Constitution, Civil Rights, and Civil Liberties, in support of Navajo people who continue to experience long-term health impacts due to radioactive contamination and exposure from abandoned uranium mines, during a hearing titled, "Examining the Need to Expand Eligibility Under the Radiation Exposure Compensation Act."

Our Administration supports the Navajo Uranium Radiation Victims Committee, and we continue to work together to call for Congress to extend the Radiation and Exposure Compensation Program beyond 2022, to include all downwinders, to expand coverage to include post-1971 workers and families, to expand eligibility for coverage under the program to include additional categories of workers and types of cancers, and to increase the compensation cap to a minimum of \$200,000 per individual.

On July 22, we will be meeting with Utah Lt. Governor Deidre M. Henderson at the Westwater Subdivision as we continue to work toward solutions to deliver water and power to Navajo families living in this area.

During the recent Utah State Legislative session, the Navajo Nation successfully secured \$500,000 in the state's budget to help with infrastructure development for the Westwater Subdivision. We have included these needs in the priority listing for the American Rescue Plan Act.

In 2019, our administration put forth legislation that proposed to set-aside \$50 million from the Síhasin Fund to establish an endowment to create more scholarship opportunities for Navajo students. We have to look far ahead, and think of our generations to come. With uncertainties in revenue and the federal budget, we must invest in scholarships so that we build our capacity to provide scholarship assistance for the growing number of students who are pursuing their educational goals.

As we move forward, our administration remains focused on addressing and mitigating the impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic. We continue to urge our Navajo people to get fully vaccinated and to take all precautions, including wearing masks to reduce the spread of COVID-19 and the variants.

We also take this opportunity to once again thank all of the frontline warriors, health care workers, Navajo Police Department, Navajo Department of Health, Navajo Area IHS, Health Command Operations Center, Chapters, all of our Navajo Nation employees, and all of our county, state, and federal partners for your dedication and hard work in the midst of this pandemic.

We join our Navajo people in praying for strength, wisdom, protection, and good health. We thank them for supporting all of our Nation's leaders. Together, we face many difficult challenges with the COVID-19 pandemic and with creating a brighter future for the Navajo Nation. With two years left in office, it is incumbent upon us as leaders to work together, to put differences aside, and address the issues that create barriers to progress and create real change.

Our ancestors passed down many good teachings, prayers, and values that have withstood the test of time and many adversities. Teachings such as T'áá hwó'ajít'éego, or self-reliance and self-determination, will help us along the way in everything that we strive to accomplish for our people. We thank you for the opportunity to present the State of the Navajo Nation Address and we wish you a productive Summer Council Session. May God bless each of you and may God bless the Great Navajo Nation.