



The 24TH NAVAJO NATION COUNCIL
Office of the Speaker

FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE

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24th Navajo Nation Council 2020 Winter Session



PHOTO: At the Winter Session of the 24th Navajo Nation Council, Delegates confirmed Associate Justice Ernestine Tsinigine to complete the 3-justice Supreme Court. This is the first time the Navajo Nation has had a full Supreme Court, and the first time all three justices are Navajo women. (1/28/20)

WINDOW ROCK, Ariz. — The 24th Navajo Nation Council convened for the 2020 Winter Session Jan. 27 and began by going into executive session after receiving a letter from the Office of the President and Vice President. The letter, delivered before the start of the session, set the tone for the rest of the week.

President Jonathan Nez stated that Resolution No. 0007-20 and Resolution No. 0008-20 ignored the law “in haste to react to proper action taken under the authority of the president.” The president stated the legislation items were not properly introduced into the legislative process to consider the override of the vetoes of CO-45-19 and CO-35-19.

The president cited Title 2 of the Navajo Nation Code, Section 1005 (C)(11): “The president’s veto shall not be subject to an override

by the Navajo Nation Council after the end of the next regular session of the Navajo Nation Council following the session in which the legislation was first passed by the Council. The letter stated the legislation should have been presented during the Dec. 19, 2019 Navajo Nation Council special session.

“As a former Council Delegate, I know how important it is to follow Navajo Nation laws and the Navajo Nation Council’s rules and procedures, so I find it interesting now how those important parts of our laws are ignored,” President Nez stated in the letter. The president also said legal action filed with the courts in the form of a temporary restraining order would be filed against Speaker Seth Damon and Council Delegate Kee Allen Begay Jr. to prevent further action on veto override legislation on the agenda.

Originally, there were 10 legislation on the agenda for consideration during the 2020 Winter Session and this was reduced to four after amendments were made to the agenda. This was done in the interest of ahį na'anish, working together with the Executive Branch. The possible court action against the Council also weighed heavy on the decision to amend the agenda. Reports were received from the president's office, BIA, Navajo Nation Chief Justice, Speaker Seth Damon, IHS, and Navajo Nation Department of Health.

Speaker's Report covered a number issues, including Resolution No. NABIJA-05-20, which opposes congressional companion bills H.R. 2181 and S. 1079, the proposed 10-mile development exclusion zone around Chaco Culture National Historic Park. Navajo allotment land owners, say the proposed buffer zone would negatively impact their land interests. The Resources and Development Committee met with allotment land owners in the Eastern Navajo Agency twice, with the last meeting at Nageezi Chapter Nov. 21, 2019.

The Speaker's Report also included the request for proposal for a Radiation and Exposure Compensation Act lobbyist on behalf of the 24th Navajo Nation Council. The Navajo Nation supports the reauthorization of RECA, which is set to expire in 2022. Another initiative from Council is to secure federal benefits for Navajo veterans through Operation: Fox-trot Bravo. Data collection from on veterans' healthcare services on the Navajo Nation is also being conducted.

Speaker Damon spoke about the pilot project between the Office of the Speaker and NTEC to distribute coal from Navajo Mine to chapters across the Navajo Nation. The project is for delivery of more than 400 tons of coal to chapters through NTEC's Community Heating Resource Program. Speaker Damon said the coal deliveries will be in four increments of 24 chapters beginning Jan. 31. Navajo Engineering and Construction Services will transport the coal to chapters. The project is supported by matching donations from Office of the Speaker, NTEC, NECA, Bisti Fuels, and North American Coal Co. Shortly after

midnight, all of the reports were received and Council recessed for the day.

The second day began with Legislation No. 0383-19, which was to approve supplemental \$1,874, 353 from the Unreserved, Undesignated Fund Balance for chapter emergency funds. Council Delegate Raymond Smith Jr. sponsored the legislation and said the intent is to bring chapters with less than \$25,000 in emergency funds to the \$25,000 emergency funding threshold.

Brenda Holgate, senior programs and projects specialist with Division of Community Development, reported that the supplemental funding support package was prepared at the end of July 2019 and was finalized the first week of Sept. The 164 review was completed Dec. 2019. Council Delegate Amber Crotty said the Sept. 3 memo from the president urged the branch chiefs to prioritize a list of unmet needs. "Do we have that agreement," she asked, noting that a similar legislation was introduced last year and was vetoed. "We should look at how the chapters are allowed to utilize funding. They're sitting on \$16 million collectively," she said.

Council Delegate Vince James said the legislation should be tabled until the Council comes to an agreement with the Executive Branch on the Permanent Trust Fund 5-year plan. "Why move this forward when we're told that (President Nez) is going to veto it?" he asked. Council Delegate Smith said, "Even if we send it across the street, it's president's decision. But what about the people across Navajo land? We're supposed to look out for them," he said.

Council Delegate Otto Tso said the 23rd Navajo Nation Council appropriated emergency funding to chapters. "To this day, we haven't received a report on how the chapters used emergency funding or the number of homes served. It's really mindboggling that we continue to give money to chapters," he said. Council Delegate Tso said some chapters have a negative balance and asked if the \$25,000 would end up servicing the debt. "Some chapters buy hay with the emergency funding. Is that appropriate? Is an animal life worth more

than a human life? These dollars are supposed to serve the human health, not the animal,” Council Delegate Tso said.

The Council debated emergency declarations and whether it was the president’s authority to declare an emergency or the Commission on Emergency Management. Many legislators said the authority should be given to the chapter president because they have firsthand knowledge of the conditions in their communities and know if a declaration is warranted or not. The legislation passed by a unanimous vote of 23-0.

Legislation No. 0377-19 was sponsored by Council Delegate Daniel Tso and was for confirmation of Lorencita Willie as Diné College student representative to the Commission on Navajo Government Development. Edward Dee, Office of Government Development Director, said he supported Willie’s nomination and that she had extraordinary stories. “She’s the posterchild for this commission. She is a single parent mom who enrolled herself at Diné College. She read a billboard that brought her to where she’s at today,” he said.

Willie addressed the Council and said she applied to make a difference. The legislation included a resolution of support from the Associated Students of Diné College, which unanimously passed by a vote of 14-0. Willie is a senior at Diné College in pursuit of her bachelor’s degree in psychology. She is also a sophomore in the associate arts program for the Diné Studies language track. “My internships and volunteer work with Diné College has provided me with the foundation to be an

ideal candidate to serve on the Commission of Navajo Government Development,” she said.

Council Delegate Elmer Begay said CNGD was created to cover problems with the tribal government and was a part of the planning process for leaders. “You speaking Navajo makes me very happy. It’s very rare to see a young person speaking Navajo,” he said. “Your planning and thinking are new and modern.” Council Delegate Carl Slater also expressed support and said, “I had the pleasure of seeing Ms. Willie speak and advocate for colleges and universities in Washington, D.C., especially our institutions here at home.”

Chairwoman Eugenia Charles-Newton thanked Willie for applying and having an interest in the CNGD. “We sat down to talk about some of the issues. The rules for Council are something that I want to address. If you have any ideas on change, I’d be interested to hear. Thank you for what you’re doing for yourself and your family.”

Council Delegate Kee Allen Begay Jr. said Willie was a student during the time he taught at Rough Rock Community School. “Many of us stood here and said our young people will one day come back before us to help. We always need new minds, new plans, young people,” he said, noting that the Diné concept of lifelong learning includes support for revitalizing Navajo language and strengthening the tribal government. Willie was unanimously confirmed by a vote of 23-0. The winter session concluded Jan. 29.

For information, please visit the Council’s website at www.navajonationcouncil.org

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MEDIA CONTACTS

Rick Abasta, Communications Director, (928) 530-8197.

Byron C. Shorty, Sr. Public Information Officer, (928) 287-2085.

nnlb.communications@gmail.com