

NAVAJO TIMES

DINÉ BI NAALTSOOS

Thursday July 30, 2020

Council tables CARES Act spending plan

BY ARLYSSA BECENTI
NAVAJO TIMES

WINDOW ROCK – In the continuing saga of how the Navajo Nation will spend its CARES Act funds, Navajo Nation Council tabled bill No. 0144-20, which would approve waterline, power line and broadband/telecommunication spending plans.

Nearly two weeks ago, the Naabik'iyáti Committee discussed this same bill for four days straight. After amendments were put into the bill, which pushed it into a deficit, the delegates weren't able to fix the bill in time for Navajo Nation Council's summer session.

On Tuesday, they came back to the bill and after a day of listening to reports from President Jonathan Nez and Chief Justice JoAnn Jayne and an evening discussing amendments, the bill was tabled.

"As leadership of Navajo Nation, we do bring all different perspectives," said the sponsor, Amber Kanazbah Crotty. "We come in with our own experience. We hear from our people. Our land has different status but what connects is the common thread of resiliency. A common thread of determination."

Crotty explained that after weeks of meetings, and then eventually the development of the bill, Council has allocated \$189 million for water projects; \$43 million for power line and solar projects; and \$83 million for broadband.

With modifications, Council developed \$3 million for solid waste projects; \$10 million Parks and Recreation economic assistance; hardship funding at \$168 million; \$32 million for the Dineh Chamber of Commerce; \$22 million for health-care facilities.

"The committee work, having the reports from the president and vice

president and judicial branch, it's clear we are on the right path," said Crotty. "There's still some modification that need to be considered."

Regarding other projects that don't meet CARES Act eligibility, Crotty said they could develop a five-year capital improvement plan.

"It's our duty and obligation to the Navajo people who are looking for immediate relief," said Crotty. "It's having the voice and seeing the calm within the storm to see this is an opportunity to prevent future exposure."

In CJN-47-20, which was passed last month, it states that the three branch chiefs shall develop and prepare spending plans in response to the COVID-19 pandemic. It was suggested that No. 0144-20 did not go through that process.

"We have been having three branch chiefs meetings," said Nez, who also said they have a \$10 million proposal from the judicial branch, which has been forgotten.

Last week, Naabik'iyáti forgot to add the \$13 million judicial was asking for into No. 0144-20, but since then judicial reduced its proposal to \$10 million. Crotty said they would figure out how to get them the dollars before she started on her presentation.

"We did send an executive expenditure plan for your consideration," said Nez. "The concern we have is the three branch chiefs are still meeting, but yet there is a legislation No. 0144-20 that yet has to be vetted."

Nez said there are similarities in the executive and legislative proposals, which adds up to \$653 million.

These include: More than \$143 million for water projects; more than \$40 million for power line projects; \$94 million for telecommunications and broadband; \$2 million for the Diné Hataa'i Association, Diné Medicine Men Association,

and the Native American Church; and \$128 million for COVID-19 testing kits, isolation sites/services, emergency medical transportation, mobile medical units, vaccinations, contact tracing/case managers/data support/callers/epidemiology services, vehicles/equipment for food deliveries for elders.

Also \$60 million for business relief; \$12 million for chapters; \$40 million for undergraduate college student relief; \$5 million for graduate college student relief; more than \$5 million for Navajo Head Start centers; nearly \$4 million for teacher development and student support; more than \$3.7 million for Department of Diné Education; \$5 million for educational incentives; \$20 million for housing improvement projects; more than \$15 million for assistance for elders; and \$739,000 for Chinle Youth Corrections.

And more than \$4 million for Canoncito Health Care Facility; more than \$22 million for former Bennett Freeze housing and solar projects; more than \$22 million for Navajo Nation Gaming Enterprise; more than \$5 million for Navajo Shopping Centers Inc.; more than \$10 million for the Judicial Branch; and more than \$7 million for propane and natural gas winter relief.

Nez said, "CARES Act funding should be intended for immediate CARES Act relief. There are treasury guidelines we have to follow. These dollars need to be spent by Dec. 30. Based on that criteria, we, the executive branch, put proposals in place that can utilize these CARES Act before the deadline."

After the presentation, Health, Education and Human Services Committee Vice Chair Carl Slater said this was the first time they ever had a finalized proposal from the executive branch.

He said, "When I say a proposal I'm saying something that has an expendi-

ture plan attached to it or flushes out how money will exit into and deliver into a program.

"I think it's incredibly important the Navajo people know since March 27th this is the first time we received any sort of final comprehensive plan," he said.

Nez responded that the executive branch proposed amounts of how these monies would be spent weeks ago and to say they are doing this at the last minute isn't true.

Worried about Nez and Lizer bringing outside contractors, Budget and Finance Committee member Elmer Begay said they have local contractors and outside sources aren't needed.

"We need our people back to work," said Begay. "It costs their life. We have a priority one and priority two that's in place. I have faith in my general contractors here. I believe in my certified chapters."

Contention between the branches continued to prevail throughout the report and, when answering Begay, Nez said they're using Navajo Engineering and Construction Authority, possibly the Army Corps of Engineers – entities that will get projects done on time and completely.

"All the Navajo businesses will get an opportunity to bid on project but we don't have enough," said Nez. "And to say I'm supporting outside companies is false, and that's just another divisive tool used to say to the people we don't support local entrepreneurs."

Similar back-and-forth dialogue continued for a few hours, but whether Council will consider the executive branches proposal isn't known as of yet.

At the end of the night, Council tabled No. 0144-20 until today and did not get back to it by press time.