

NAVAJO TIMES

DINÉ BI NAALTSOOS

Thursday January 21, 2021

We got water, what's next? NTUA stresses planning

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NAVAJO TIMES

WINDOW ROCK –Navajo Tribal Utility Authority Deputy General Manager Rex Kontz told the Budget and Finance Committee that the goal is independence.

On Tuesday, Kontz and NTUA general counsel Arash Moalemi presented to the committee on the Navajo Nation Global Water Strategy and Status.

"In a broader, big-picture plan for growth and development, our recommendation as a nation has to really start looking at creating growth centers on Navajo," said Kontz. "You kind of have growth centers starting where our main towns are – Shiprock, Chinle, Kayenta, Tuba City, those types of areas. You have great potential in areas wherever there is travel intersection."

He listed the areas with this potential such as Sheepsprings, Mexican Springs and Twin Lakes, New Mexico. Crossroad communities like these can benefit from some infrastructure planning, he said.

"From our calculation... we are using about 10,000 acre-feet of water across Navajo," said Kontz. "Water Management did a broader study ... they're saying 12,600 feet of acre-feet of use."

Add the recent New Mexico and Utah water rights settlements totaling 101,500 acre-feet, and the Navajo Nation is using only one-tenth of the water it has rights to, said Kontz.

"We have nine times more water available to us in these settlements," said Kontz. "How do we make use of that much water so the Nation can benefit from it?"

Water is the utility with the least spread, as opposed to the spread of electrical lines across Navajo, said Kontz. The one-page presentation given to committee members stated the recent settlement between the Navajo Nation and New Mexico funded \$1 billion for the San Juan and Cutter lateral waterlines. The Navajo Nation funded \$245 million worth of water and wastewater projects to increase accessibility and create potential for growth.

Accessing all that newly settled water will not be cheap. Water systems are way more than pipes, Kontz noted. They include waste water disposal; reservoirs to capture and store moving water; distribution systems to unserved homes, larger lines to businesses, service centers and government installations; and an economic and community development plan, both local and global.

Delegate Amber Crotty said delegates have definitely been considering these things, especially in this time of constant hand washing.

"I know the water unit was asking Navajo leadership to plan out the economic opportunity that we need to identify," said Crotty, "so that we can make sure we have enough water to provide development."

NTUA provided a map of unserved areas, prompting Delegate Raymond Smith to observe that there are still many areas that lack running water. He also expressed the need to lobby state legislatures to help with getting water to homes.

"We really need to get our

people good quality water," said Smith.

Last Friday, the Navajo Nation Council approved \$33.8 million from the Sihásin Fund for the Department of Water Resources' Emergency Projects Expenditure Plan.

"There's probably going to be another CARES funding coming out," said Smith. "Make that statement known to the federal government: Don't cut us short like they did with Dec. 30. When they put a deadline like Dec. 30, we were scrambling. It's surprising how much money we reverted back to Hardship."

In order to spend the funds before they reverted back to the federal government, Council had created a Hardship Assistance Fund for every tribal member impacted by the COVID-19 pandemic. Any project money not spent or encumbered by Nov. 20 went into the Hardship Assistance pot.

The controller's office had previously reported \$320 million was reverted into the Hardship Assistance Fund. Recently NTUA stated it will return another \$34 million to the fund.

While the federal government did extend the deadline to use the money, the Council had already created the fund and Navajos were anxious to receive their hardship checks. The checks will go out in waves starting this week.