

Roads project takes center stage at county meeting

Written by By Cody Begaye Sun Correspondent
Friday, 09 November 2018 06:50



Heated right-of-way item disapproved at meeting

The final item on the McKinley County Board of Commissioners' agenda list turned out to be the first item discussed at the Nov. 6 regular meeting.

The item, which was not approved at the meeting, involved Resolution No. NOV-18-078, which details various interests in county maintained roads, public roads that are privately maintained and the non-maintenance of roads without express rights-of-way within other jurisdictions.

The meeting room in the McKinley County Courthouse was filled with community members and leaders from local Navajo Nation chapters who voiced a unanimous sentiment – the commission should not take action on this item just yet.

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Action on the item would include the county stopping work on roads it does not have express interest in or right-of-way for.

County Manager Anthony Dimas Jr. said complications with maintenance on numerous county roads stem from the county not having the right-of-way on those roads.

Board Chairperson Genevieve Jackson said many of the county roads that fall under the resolution are rural dirt roads that have been used since the late 1800s. Today, these roads are used daily to access both county schools and senior centers.

Julie Badonie, chapter president for Tohatchi, said she was surprised the item was on the agenda for this meeting. She said she found out about the measure from a chapter official at an Albuquerque gathering.

Badonie said the county should have informed individual chapters about their proposals to stop maintenance on the roads.

“We should have been told about this [individually],” she said.

David Silversmith, proposal writer for the Navajo Division of Transportation, was also present at the meeting and said there has been no real discussion or attempt to resolve these issues from any side. But, he said, informing the public is a good starting point.

“Now we have to acknowledge [these issues],” he said. “The chapters can step forward. [People are] looking forward to changes with more communication and transparency.”

Silversmith said an election day was not the time to act on the item, and the right-of-way process can take a long time to resolve.

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Once the public comments subsided, Jackson took the opportunity to address the room about what the board had done in the past to resolve roads issues.

“I ask, where are the delegates?” she said, recounting a planned meeting with several county chapters to which no delegates showed up.

Jackson said the board went before U.S. Congress eight times to address the roads issue, but the Bureau of Indian Affairs and NDOT did not show up to tackle the matter.

“It bothers us — [not having decent roads] is a great injustice,” Jackson said. “[BIA] just won’t move.”

District 1 Commissioner Carol Bowman-Muskett said she chose not to act on the seemingly complex resolution.

“I feel for the people out there,” she said, adding it’s up to the chapter officials and community members to push BIA and NDOT to take action on the matter.

She said various county departments had to make budget cuts in order to fund maintenance work on county roads.

District 3 Commissioner Bill Lee provided the costs to fix various county roads over the past several years — \$1.2 million in 2016, \$1.1 million in 2017 and roughly \$700,000 so far this year.

Lee said the county is doing everything it can to get the attention of crucial entities like the BIA and NDOT.

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He said the county roads department constructed an emergency bypass through Manuelito Canyon after the South Manuelito Bridge No. 8080 was closed in 2013.

Despite appearing to be a beneficial move for the community, Lee said county officials were threatened with potential jail time for helping with roads.

“Jail time because we didn’t have right of way,” he said, stressing how important the process is for roads maintenance.

Lee and the rest of the commissioners reminded the citizens and chapter officials in the room to direct their frustrations and questions toward the BIA and their council delegates.

“This will come back, and we will need everyone’s help [to resolve it],” Lee said.

The item was disapproved with a 3-0-0 vote.

Other items discussed at meeting included:

The first reading of Ordinance No. NOV-18-006 Wireless Telecommunications Facilities Ordinance. The Broadband Communications Act mentioned by County Attorney Doug Decker lasts up to 15 years and is flexible. The board will wait for comments on the draft from partner entities Sacred Wind Communications and Oso Internet Solutions before taking action.

The second reading of Ordinance No. NOV-18-005 involves a Local Economic Development Project for Financial Assistance proposed by Thomas L. Elkins of Cowboys and Indians. The item includes the purchase of a former ambulance building in Thoreau for maintenance and repair to convert into a workspace. The item was approved with a 3-0-0 vote.

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Resolution NOV-18-080 would increase budgeted revenues and expenses for the purchase of a modular building for Red Lake Chapter School funded by DFA in the amount of \$50,000, was approved with a 3-0-0 vote.

An Award to Business Environments for IFB NO. 2018-15 for tile installation of McKinley County Courthouse was approved with a 3-0-0 vote.

By Cody Begaye
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