

Written by gallupsun
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WASHINGTON D.C. — The Navajo Hopi Land Commission engaged in a discussion with White House officials on March 20, advocating for the urgent appointment of a commissioner to the Office of Navajo Hopi Indian Relocation. This key leadership role is fundamental in addressing the residual challenges of the Navajo-Hopi land dispute, which includes the dire situation of relocated Navajo families.

NHLC Chair Otto Tso, Vice Chair Casey Allen Johnson, and commissioners Vince James and Germaine Simonson, alongside Navajo Nation Council Speaker Crystalne Curley, emphasized the critical need for a dedicated ONHIR commissioner during their meeting with Rose Petoskey, Senior Advisor to the White House Office of Intergovernmental Affairs and Director of Tribal Affairs, and Elizabeth Reese, Senior Policy Advisor for Native Affairs at the White House Domestic Policy Council.

"Without a commissioner, ONHIR lacks the clear direction necessary to make substantive progress in assisting families affected by the relocation," Tso said, highlighting the resultant homelessness among many Navajo families due to inadequate resources and housing.

The plight of these families dates back to the 1966 Bennett Freeze, when Bureau of Indian Affairs Commissioner Robert Bennett halted development on approximately 1.6 million acres of disputed land, severely limiting Navajo communities from home improvements or new construction. President Barack Obama's decision to lift the "freeze" in 2009 was a significant milestone, yet the ONHIR's mission to facilitate the relocation process remains hampered by numerous enduring difficulties.

James, who has persistently engaged with White House officials over the years, voiced his concern about the apparent lack of prioritization from the Biden Administration in appointing a commissioner, a role that is crucial for moving forward.

While President Buu Nygren could not attend the meeting in person, his commitment to the cause was represented by Justin Ahasteen, Director of the Navajo Nation Washington Office. In a statement shared by Ahasteen, President Nygren underscored the urgency of the matter: "The absence of an ONHIR commissioner is not merely an administrative oversight; it is a lingering obstacle to the well-being of our people. I stand with the NHLC in calling upon the Biden Administration to address this issue with the swiftness it warrants."

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The NHLC's efforts extend beyond these White House engagements, as members continue to collaborate with Congress to seek technical amendments to the Navajo Hopi Land Settlement Act, aiming to better serve the needs of displaced Navajo families.

The NHLC, Office of the President and Vice President, and the Office of the Speaker remain committed to the addressing the longstanding issues and seeking resolutions.

