

Navajo Nation Council members seek to bridge telecommunication gaps

Written by Staff Reports
Friday, 28 July 2017 01:05



LEUPP, Ariz. – 23rd Navajo Nation Council members met with the First Responder Network Authority, or FirstNet, on Tuesday to discuss the expansion and improvement of telecommunication networks on the Navajo Nation, specifically relating to public safety.

FirstNet was established in 2012 by the U.S. Congress in response to the 9/11 terrorist attacks, in which the system was designed to deliver a nationwide broadband network dedicated to public safety, to strengthen public safety users' communications capabilities enabling them to respond more quickly and effectively to accidents, disasters, and emergencies.

Law and Order Committee member Council Delegate Kee Allen Begay, Jr. (Low Mountain, Many Farms, Nazlini, Tachee/Blue Gap, Tselani/Cottonwood) and the Office of the Speaker coordinated the leadership meeting, and said the purpose of the discussion is to seek cooperation and collaboration between the Navajo Nation and surrounding communities, counties, and neighboring tribes.

“Understanding that the state’s governors are the final authority in considering to opt into the FirstNet system, I implore the governors to prioritize the Navajo Nation and surrounding rural communities,” said Delegate Begay. “I also want to encourage my colleagues to be fully aware of what FirstNet can do for the Navajo Nation, it’s so important that we take advantage of this program.”

Delegate Begay added that it was important for all entities to continue maintaining partnerships to coordinate an effective public safety telecommunication system. He also thanked the county officials and law enforcement, city mayors, and other neighboring tribes for attending the leadership meeting.

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FirstNet is led by a board composed of individuals from the public safety community, federal, state, and local governments, as well as technology, finance, and wireless sectors. FirstNet has a staff of about 200 employees with expertise in public safety, telecommunications, customer service, technology, procurement, and other areas needed to develop the network.

In an address at the FirstNet leadership meeting, Speaker of the 23rd Navajo Nation Council LoRenzo Bates (Nenahnezad, Newcomb, San Juan, T'iis Tsoh Sikaad, Tse'Daa'Kaan, Upper Fruitland) expressed appreciation to FirstNet for providing vital information regarding the telecommunications network and how it can supplement the Nation's public safety initiative.

"The Navajo Nation is eager to work with and understand the states' proposal and deployment of their FirstNet integration plans. It is very important the tribes are consulted as progress is made regarding telecommunications expansion in Indian Country, especially the Navajo Nation which lies in three states," said Speaker Bates.

He added that the Council supported the use of deployable technologies such as mobile communication systems that can be temporarily installed in areas where emergencies may occur, which allow the use of existing satellite, microwave, and radio systems to communicate emergencies to rural communities with limited telecommunication capabilities.

Council Delegate Amber Kanazbah Crotty (Beclabito, Cove, Gadi'i'áhi/To'Koi, Red Valley, Tooh Haltsooi, Toadlena/Two Grey Hills, Tsé alnáoz't'l'í), chair for the Sexual Assault Prevention Subcommittee, reiterated the need for the Navajo Nation to implement its own unique AMBER Alert system, and said FirstNet is a vital component to its development.

"Every Navajo citizen should have access to emergency communication. Living in a rural area has many positive aspects, but we are constantly challenged with emergency communications and notifications like severe weather and AMBER Alerts. We need to continue to have frank conversations with elected officials from the three states and service providers. This will save lives and prevent future tragedies," said Delegate Crotty.

Council delegates in attendance at the leadership meeting included Edmund Yazzie, Raymond Smith, Jr., Otto Tso, Herman Daniels, Jr., Dwight Witherspoon, and Jonathan Perry.

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In addition to the leadership meeting, Delegate Begay who also serves as chair for the Tribal-Interior Budget Council's Subcommittee on Public Safety and Justice provided an overview of the subcommittees activities and updates regarding the FY2018 U.S. Department of Justice and Bureau of Indian Affairs public safety budget proposals.

"The current process for tribes to gain access to public safety funding is done on a competitive basis, however, tribes should not have to compete for federal funding. We have to advocate and push for a way to decrease the bureaucratic processes and streamline funding directly to tribes," said Delegate Begay.

The TIBC also held its council meeting at the Twin Arrows Navajo Casino Resort from July 24-27. The council provides a forum and process for tribal governments and federal officials to work together in developing annual budget requests for Native American programs within the U.S. Department of the Interior, and educates and advises tribes regarding the federal budget process.

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