

Eighteen candidates run for Navajo Nation President

Written by By Rick Abasta Sun Correspondent
Friday, 24 August 2018 06:21



TSAILE, Ariz. — Since July, presidential candidate forums, moderated by various media groups, have been held across the Navajo Nation.

The fifth and final forum was held on the main campus of Diné College on Aug. 20.

The candidates, by order on the ballot are Benny Bahe, President Russell Begaye, Tom Chee, Vice President Jonathan Nez, Calvin Lee Jr., Joe Shirley Jr., Vincent H. Yazzie, Rex Lee Jim, Norman Patrick Brown, Trudie Jackson, Shawn Redd, Alton Joe Shepherd, Emily Ellison, Tom Tso, Kevin Cody, Hope MacDonald Lonetree, Nick X. Taylor, and Dineh Benally.

All of the candidates running for president were in attendance for the final forum, with the exception of Redd.

A moderator introduced Tristan Black, a junior at Diné College majoring in Diné Studies.

“I’m really glad to go to school at Diné College,” Black said before delivering a prayer in Navajo for the benediction.

Dr. Charles “Monty” Roessel, Diné College President, provided the welcome address and a history of the institution, which is celebrating its 50th year.

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“On behalf of our Diné College Board of Regents, I welcome you to the first tribal college in the country. In 1968, Chairman Raymond Nakai shared his bold and courageous dream of starting a college,” he said.

Fifty years later, the candidate forum for the tribal presidency was assembled on the campus of a college that began as a matter of self-determination, and is today the premiere institution for Navajo knowledge.

Candidates were asked four questions throughout the night by panelists, and they had two minutes to respond, with the final sequence providing one-minute responses for the lightening round. There was also an opportunity for closing remarks.

Some of the more interesting questions and responses from the night included panelist Arlyssa Becenti’s question to Begaye about the \$1.4 million spent to lease two jets.

“Recently, I have read that the Navajo Nation is leasing two jets monthly for \$1.4 million. Is this necessary and why?” Becenti asked.

Begaye asked her to repeat the question twice, and the audience began to boo and murmur loudly with his hesitancy to respond.

“Get to the point,” Begaye said.

“The point is, why are you leasing two jets for \$1.4 million a month?” Becenti asked again.

“To do what?” Begaye asked.

“To lease two jets,” Becenti replied.

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Begaye said he drives everywhere and does not fly.

“There’s no jets, no planes. Our pilots all took off. There’s no *beso* [money] out there,” he said.

Panelist Marcia Peshlakai asked Jim about his plans to help young people learn the Navajo language.

“What would you do to get them involved and active in the learning process?” she asked.

Responding in Navajo, Jim said the first thing is to turn Navajo Head Start into a full-year program, with the development of a language program.

“Then have them placed next to senior centers where grandparents can come in and talk to them in Navajo,” he said. “[Step two] is to start a virtual university where we develop language programs where any Navajo anywhere around the world can access them.”

Jim added that establishing a Navajo school of performing and fine arts, encompassing Navajo thinking, would be ideal.

Nez was asked what he would do with the Permanent Trust Fund if he won the presidency.

“That money belongs to you,” Nez said, referring to Navajo people.

He said there’s more than \$3 billion in the PTF, and that if voters wanted to utilize those funds to address the tremendous needs of the Navajo Nation, that’s their prerogative.

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“It’s a very important election,” Nez said. “If you do not vote, I guarantee you that it’s going to be the same old way. We need to get good leaders into office, and if you vote me in, I will guarantee you that we will take care of the people’s money.”

Chee expressed appreciation for all of the candidates running for office.

“You’ve got to have courage, you’ve got to have stamina, you’ve got to have the willpower to go against something as enormous as the Navajo Nation’s fight with poverty, lack of standard of living that the federal government has put us in,” Chee said.

The primary election for the tribal presidency is Aug. 28.

By Rick Abasta
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