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President Begaye: Line Item Vetoes Executed to Protect Navajo People's Voice

WINDOW ROCK, Ariz.—With budget deficits looming, the Navajo government must tighten their belts and remain fastidious with tribal funds.

That sentiment was expressed on Sept. 27, when Navajo Nation President Russell Begaye executed his line item veto authority in 17 areas of the comprehensive budget that was approved by the tribal council on Sept. 8.

Before the budget was debated on the floor of the tribal council chamber, Executive Branch divisions developed strategic plans to guide the development of the budget for their respective programs and departments.

Anywhere from nine to 10 months were spent on the development of the division budgets.

"First and foremost, our administration worked tirelessly on ensuring budgets were created and driven by strategy. The budget submitted to council for consideration was built on strategic planning, not on pet projects, political popularity, or re-election considerations," said President Begaye.

Coming together to strategize the needs of the Navajo people is important at this moment in the tribe's history, said Vice President Jonathan Nez, because the Nation faces a potential \$20 million budget deficit that was shored up this year by the Permanent Trust Fund interest.

The one time solution to the budget shortfall will not be available next year, when the projected deficit is predicted to be \$22 million or more, he added.

"We need to be strategic in our budgeting, more than ever before," said Vice President Nez. "This is the chance for restructuring and prioritizing how we deliver services to the Navajo people."

President Begaye said his decision to implement the line item vetoes stemmed from the responsibility to ensure all budget actions

are in compliance with the Appropriations Act.

"It is important to understand that the Navajo Area Agency on Aging, grazing officials and chapters received their operating budget to deliver services. What was line item vetoed was supplemental funding taken from a prohibited account," he said.

The supplemental funding for the three programs was taken from the personnel lapse fund, which was not established for that purpose.

"We have to do things right. The money was taken from a fund that was for retirees from the tribal work force. This is the (Navajo) people's money. We're making sure that we're doing things right," President Begaye said.

The three branch agreement entered into between the Executive, Legislative and Judicial branches of government must be honored, he added, noting that the tribal council continues to push the limits of their authority.

"We asked the council to approve the Executive Branch budget because it was based on strategy but they funded unnecessary programs, moved things around, undermining the strategic planning that went into development of budget for the Executive Branch, said President Begaye. "Therefore I used the line item veto authority to protect those strategies. We can't expect to carry out our priorities effectively without a budget that compliments those priorities."

When the tribal council attempted to usurp the presidential line item veto authority through the legislative process, the bill failed. It was an attempt by council to silence the people's voice, he said.

Vice President Nez said, "President Begaye takes his line item veto authority very seriously, in order to be fiscally responsible with the Navajo people's money. All appropriation decisions should come before the president for approval, that's what the people voted for."

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