

## **Broadband Initiative on Navajo Nation Notes**

Friday, March 18, 2022

1 – 4 p.m. MST

In-Person and Zoom Meeting

Arizona Commerce Authority | First Floor Conference Room

100 N. 7th Ave – Suite 400, Phoenix, AZ 85007

Presiding: Coconino County District 5 Supervisor Lena Fowler

24th NNC Resources and Development Committee Member Kee Allen Begay, Jr.

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### **Welcome and Introduction – Lena Fowler, Coconino County Supervisor:**

- Ms. Fowler introduces herself and the objective of the broadband initiative meeting. Acknowledges Jeff Sobotka for his assistance in today's meeting and thanks everyone for joining the today.

### **Comments - Kee Allen Begay Jr., Navajo Nation Council Delegate:**

- Mr. Begay introduces himself and acknowledges all those present today. Mr. Begay continues with a brief update. Indicates he has spoken with Mujtaba regarding several issues and will continue to reach out to the BIA regional directors, public school administration, and BIA schools regarding broadband. Noted that he has spoken with ADOT recently regarding the expansion of the smart highway through Navajo Nation and the right of ways.

### **Summary of Broadband Initiative on Navajo Nation - Patrick Sandoval, Apache County Dist. 1 Manager:**

- Notes the successful progress of the meetings so far. Indicated one of the last meeting presenters discussed equity and how they would like to see equity in multiple areas. Mr. Sandoval notes there is a noticeable difference in connectivity when one lives in a city and with someone living on the Navajo Nation and the frustrations that arise when we are not able to have the same connection. Due to these issues and current funding, we can address the lack of broadband on a multiorganizational level and coordinate. Counties can continue to help the Navajo Nation in moving forward and bring tourism to another level with additional income. Partnership is what is needed to distribute collective funds and achieve broadband goals for the Navajo Nation. Makes note that Sonia Nez is the new program manager for the established Navajo Nation broadband office.

### **Comments – Jeff Sobotka, AZ State Broadband Director:**

- Mr. Sobotka makes a note of one point he has noticed across rural communities and that is bringing educated children back to these communities. Technologically educated people can work remotely and live in rural communities and Mr. Sobotka believes with improvements in broadband we can have these people come back into the rural communities.

### **Arizona Corporation Commission Presentation - Lea Marquez Peterson, Chairwoman of Arizona Cooperate Commission:**

- Ms. Peterson gives a brief introduction and notes that the commission has limited authority with telecommunications. The commission has been responsible for approving telecom companies in coming to the State of Arizona, referred to as ETC designation. As part of the Commission and a community member she is passionate about having broadband accessible for everyone especially for economic development in rural and tribal communities. The Commission deals with the Arizona Universal Service Fund. The fund's original purpose was to help cover the costs of providing telephone services in high-cost areas and is often seen as a surcharge on our phone bill. The Commission is looking on how to apply this surcharge to the broadband needs of today due to the changing needs of communication. Ms. Peterson notes the formation of a national broadband task force by the National Association of Regulatory Utility Commissioners about a year ago where she represented Arizona. The task force consisted of other state commissioners who were looking at collaborating and noting what their best practices are. The primary focus of the task force is to provide broadband to unserved and underserved communities across the nation and come up with a set of recommendations. Their recommendations were broadband mapping, enhancing broadband program coordination, ensuring broadband providers are meeting their obligations, supporting non-traditional providers and all broadband adoption funds are available. The Arizona Broadband Stakeholder Network is another meeting that was established since the beginning of the pandemic that has similar goals as the broadband initiative.

**Update - Zachary Harris, Policy and Budget Advisor for Arizona Governor's Broadband and Transportation:**

- Mr. Harris comments that the pandemic has highlighted the growing needs for broadband. We need to better connect our growing state and to address the needs in communities that are unserved and underserved. In the summer and November of last year the Governor announced \$100 million dollar grant program to build broadband corridors and help improve broadband infrastructure. Last month an additional \$68 million investment was announced to expand the I-40 west corridor initiative. With these initiatives they plan to serve over 160,000 people. The Arizona owned fiber network will provide a backbone for broadband services.

**Arizona Commerce Authority Broadband Infrastructure Program Presentation – Jeff Sobotka, AZ State Broadband Director:**

- Mr. Sobotka gives a PowerPoint presentation. Broadband is important today due to access that it provides us beyond entertainment use. Grants given for broadband in previous years has helped certain areas, but the recent \$100 million dollar grant will better serve those that are able to receive it. One of the issues is the high need for grant funds, and they have received nearly twice as many applications than originally anticipated requesting for funding. The Arizona Statewide Broadband Strategic Middle Mile Plan looked to bring broadband to communities that were identified as being unserved and underserved which was mainly along the interstate highway. Building this backbone along the interstate is ideal for fiber as communities can access these lines and allow for smart highways. The Infrastructure Act has a lot of funding, \$65 billion, but they will need to determine where those funds will go. They will set funds aside for tribal communities. Mr. Sobotka highlights the eligibility requirements for tribal entities and their use of the funds. The Middle mile infrastructure funds will help benefit multiple communities

including tribal communities and highway 191 that was mentioned previously. Partnerships and collaboration will help achieve these broadband goals.

**The Office of Congressman Tom O'Halleran – Sierra Fuller, Legal Assistant:**

- Ms. Fuller gave a brief update that indicates Tom O'Halleran's office is aware of the importance of broadband not just on Navajo Nation but also in other rural communities. They knew the need for broadband even before the pandemic highlighted that importance. Their office was excited to see how the funding from the American Rescue Plan Act as well as the state's \$100 million dollar funding was being used by tribal up to state levels for broadband. She also noted that they were able to get the right of ways approved for the Arcadian Infracom to build out an infrastructure from Denver to Tuba City. They are working with BIA to get the right of ways needed for other infrastructure needs.

**The Office of U.S. Senator Mark Kelly – Joe Russell, Legislative Assistant:**

- Mr. Russell notes that fiscal funding is important when addressing infrastructure laws because of the competitive grant funding opportunities currently available. These broadband meetings are helping bring attention to these opportunities and to highlight projects that Senator Kelly is working on in connection with broadband.

**Arizona Department of Transportation Broadband Office – Brad Burgess, Program Administrator:**

- A brief update. The broadband office within ADOT started about 18 months ago when most of the broadband initiatives started. They are currently learning about fiber and with the help of experts they are getting things done. ADOT is looking to expand broadband opportunities to help more communities. They have been paying a fee with Arizona NPS and BLM departments to cover the cost of right of ways for multiple carriers to reduce the amount of barriers each one would have encountered separately.

**Comments – Myron Lizer, Navajo Nation Vice-President:**

- Mr. Lizer appreciated the collaboration of the broadband meetings and the partnerships being established to bring broadband infrastructure to the Navajo Nation. He hopes for the this to expand and encourages the unity established.

**Utah Broadband Center – Rebecca Dilg, Director of the UT Broadband Center & Lynne Yocam, UDOT:**

- Ms. Dilg gave a PowerPoint presentation. Emery Telcom is looking to connect Monument Valley into Navajo Mountain, but the greatest challenge is permitting. Because Emery Telcom will own the fiber, they are looking to get it to the homes. Ms. Yocam noted environmental clearances are one of the hardest ones to get while working to preserve cultural areas. That placing fiber closer the road can help circumvent some of the permitting needed and connection to the fiber is more easily done. The only downside is when the road needs to expand, and you need to move the conduits and fiber lines. Emery Telcom is also looking to have fiber available to homes from Mexican Hat to Halchita but are waiting on permission from Navajo Nation. San Juan School District has implemented a local area network project (LAN) with Solekteck and NTUA partnered with Nokia to provide tower sites to the local communities. Another challenge with connecting fiber to the area is the NTUA/Nokia towers are individually owned and installing

fiber on the individual towers can take some time due to this. Makes note of the 41 public Wi-Fi hot spots provided by NTUA during the pandemic but fiber is still the best option. There is federal funding available, and they are excited to see NTUA and other organizations actively seeking this funding but there is still not enough funding to go around. Shows map of current broadband infrastructure and of areas where fiber is established, under construction and fiber needed areas in Utah. Utah does have an Affordable Connectivity Program that makes internet affordable for low-income households. They are creating a plan and need to have the Navajo Nation, other tribal communities, and counties to be part of the plan to help provide broadband infrastructure in Utah.

**Presentation – Gar Clarke, New Mexico Department of Information Technology Broadband Manager and Tribal Liaison:**

- The Connect New Mexico Act was created last year and looks at funds for broadband needs. They are looking to work with different partnerships including Navajo Nation. They have created the Office of Broadband Access and Expansion to coordinate broadband efforts and funding across the state headed by Matt Schmitt. They have implemented a middle mile plan and they have hired Sandeep Taxali to assist them in the application of grants. They are looking at standards and maintaining the broadband map that has been developing for several years. They also have a strategic map that identifies broadband projects throughout the state with their costs. It also identifies by location the unserved and underserved areas utilizing data from the 911 system and other providers. They are looking to collaborate with various government officials including tribal officials in creating a broadband network. They have recently extended fiber into six pueblo villages that are now providing it into households. The State of New Mexico wants to turn broadband into a utility so it can qualify for public and private partnerships that is currently not allowed. The NM Technical Assistance Program (NM TAP) is available to entities to provide them with technical assistance on broadband implementation planning and engineering. Mr. Clarke continues to overview current broadband projects and funding. They are looking to complete a Navajo Nation map like the state broadband map that shows the location of broadband needs. Addressing needs to be done to identify these areas on the Navajo Nation but it is taking a long time. One of the things New Mexico did during the pandemic was provide public hotspots in parking lots throughout the state and on tribal lands. According to New Mexico unserved locations are defined as having very low, barely functioning internet to no internet at all. Underserved areas have low functioning internet. They are glad to see the Navajo Nation working with Sacred Wind to expand broadband infrastructure. Mr. Clarke notes that knowing where fiber coverage is generally known, but fiber routes and how much fiber is available in those routes are kept confidential. This helps keep the New Mexico internet service providers (ISP) a competitive edge. Utah makes note that they don't keep their right of ways secretive, and the public can view a map of where the fiber is located. They are also working with SpaceX to provide Starlink to students.

**Update – Ed Mills, Colorado Broadband Office Tribal Liaison:**

Mr. Mills has been working with the Ute Mountain and Southern Ute tribes in providing them funding and broadband infrastructure. Both tribes have started projects. The Southern Ute tribe will be laying down a fiber backbone that will eventually provide fiber to homes. Mr. Mills has connected Arcadian

Infracom to the Southern Ute tribe and is looking forward to that relationship to begin. He will continue to work with these tribes in establishing broadband infrastructure.

**Update on Navajo Nation Legislation 0257-21 – Donovan Hanley, Navajo Nation Speaker’s Office & Kee Allen Begay Jr. NN Council Delegate:**

- Mr. Hanley thanks everyone for coming together today. The legislation, if approved, will allocate a portion of the Navajo Nation Fiscal Recovery Funds (NNFRF) for broadband projects and other projects. Broadband is projected to received 18% of the total NNFRF funds but this is not approved yet. This legislation was first introduced on November 24, 2021. At the next Navajo Nation work session, they will continue to discuss this legislation. They would like to have this legislation ready for their spring session in April. Mr. Begay notes that a legislation may be introduced but it is not guaranteed to be approved. He also notes that we can’t forget the smaller communities and getting them connected. He encourages the need for collaboration.

**Comments – Jeff Sobotka, AZ State Broadband Director:**

- Thanks everyone for attending today’s meeting and announces next meeting date.  
Wednesday, April 13 @ 9 AM DST  
Navajo Utah Commission Conference Room  
Montezuma Creek, UT

**MEETING ENDS**