

Uranium mining, Medicaid highlighted at Commission meeting

Written by Gallupsun Staff
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Leroy Tso was one of the speakers present at the McKinley County Board of Commissioners meeting June 26. He was there to present for the action on Item 7, JUN-18-039, which would

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support “New Mexico’s Development of a Public Option Buy-In for Healthcare Coverage to Better Ensure Affordability and Choice.”

“We are here together because we feel it is important to stand strong and support the quality of affordable health care for all families,” Tso said.

Tso spoke on behalf of Strong Families N.M., a group formed to pass policy at local and state levels in support of a Medicaid Buy-In Plan, a publicly-funded healthcare option for everyone in New Mexico.

Tso suggested the Commission look at how the law can be incorporated and have large groups inserted into the program.

Bill Lee, commissioner, felt the plan was solid. The action was approved by a 3-0-0 vote.

Another issue that garnered further discussion were the petitions, letters of support, and resolutions of Navajo Leadership regarding the Uranium Task Force.

Both the presenter, Janene Yazzie, and the Commission agreed that everyone should do whatever is possible to establish the task force because everyone living in the region should be aware of the legacy of the impact of uranium mining.

However, Lee admitted that progress was slow because of a lack of responses from other officials.

“We have reached out three or four times to the attorney for a meeting, [but] getting zero response,” Lee said during the meeting. He also noted this contact first started two months ago.

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The Commission noted during the meeting that the lack of responses and communication results in accusations of no interest in the cause and hurting the cleanup efforts.

Speakers from the group Eastern Navajos Dine Against Uranium Mining said their cause could be bolstered by the Good Neighbor Program, as well as the support of Navajo Nation Council Delegate Edmund Yazzie.

"[The] startup was about five years ago but it was voted down," Yazzie said during the meeting. He said the cleanup issue has to be brought up during meetings.

ENDAUM is a grassroots group opposing construction of the Crownpoint Uranium Project, which is a uranium in situ leach (ISL) mining operation for sites in Churchrock and Crownpoint chapters.

Despite making it clear that all of the parties involved are on the same page regarding cleanup, the Commission admits gathering all of those groups together is a challenge.

"[It's] not easy getting the right people together," Genevieve Jackson, chairperson, said during the meeting. "We're all aware of the effects [of mining]."

The people who speak to this issue are directly related to the events pertaining to uranium mining both in the present and the past. Some of these accounts were used for the 2010 book *Yellow Dirt: An American Story of a Poisoned Land and a People Betrayed*, which tells of the story of uranium mining on the Navajo reservation and its legacy of sickness and government neglect.

Speakers from ENDAUM extended an invitation for the annual commemorative walk hosted by the Red Water Pond Community Association on July 16. Participants walk to the site of the 1979 Church Rock uranium tailings spill and say healing prayers for both families and the community.

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Item 2 on the agenda, the payment of bills in the amount of over \$2,625,000 from May 31 to June 20, was approved by a 3-0-0 vote. The bills include a ratified payment totaling over \$387,000; a P-Card payment for May of over \$80,000; and the approval and delegation of the County Manager and Finance Direct specific authority limited to paying bills between June 21 and July 18.

The next regular meeting will be held on July 24.