Are national, tribal parks reopening?

Written by Staff Reports
Friday, 26 February 2021 05:06







24th Navajo Nation Council committee hears plans

WINDOW ROCK, Ariz. — The Resources and Development Committee of the 24th Navajo Nation Council received reports regarding coronavirus pandemic impacts on the U.S. National Parks Service's reopening plans for the Grand Canyon National Park's east entrance, the status of Navajo Nation tribal parks, and nearby Navajo-owned hotels during their regular meeting Feb 16.

In the first report, GCNP Superintendent Edward Keable said the NPS currently plans to reopen its eastern park entrance on May 21.

"Keeping safety in mind, we are not committed to this date and want to be good neighbors by incorporating the Navajo Nation's interests in our plans," Keable said.

Members of the RDC presented their concerns for the safety of both Navajo Nation residents and Grand Canyon tourists during a possible reopening. Navajo Nation Department of Health Executive Director Dr. Jill Jim and Office of President and Vice President Deputy Chief of Staff Milton Bluehouse, Jr. also joined the meeting to inform Keable of current pandemic conditions on the Navajo Nation regarding a recent curfew order change.

"The purpose of our current health order is to expand the vaccine distribution and contribute to the Navajo Nation's economic recovery plan. But, it is a balancing act and a race against time," Bluehouse said.

Bluehouse indicated the Navajo Nation leads the country in vaccine distributions with over 2,000 Navajos being vaccinated on the weekend of Feb. 6 alone. The Health Command Operations Center, under guidance from Dr. Jim, is focused on staying ahead of a possible third Covid-19 positive case surge with new variants of the virus reported in surrounding states.

Navajo Nation President Jonathan Nez and Council Delegate Mark Freeland (Becenti, Lake

Valley, Náhodishgish, Standing Rock, Whiterock, Huerfano, Nageezi, Crownpoint) both called for a future work session to communicate Navajo priorities with the NPS that would include OPVP, the Navajo Nation Historical Preservation Department, the Navajo Nation Division of Natural Resources and the Navajo Nation Parks and Recreation Department.

Keable concurred and indicated he would bring Grand Canyon Tribal Liaison Mike Lyndon to the meeting and maintain contact.

With the Navajo Nation under a level-red declaration, the highest Covid-19 concentration-code level, Begaye said many in-person services, such as tours, have been canceled. Consequently, 15 to 20 of the 75 department staff members have lost their jobs or have been furloughed.

Dr. Jim explained the HCOC's data-driven approach to creating gating criteria for determining the Navajo Nation's Covid-19 code levels involves an evaluation of the number of positive Covid-19 cases and other factors related to the spread of the virus. Although Covid-19 numbers have gone down, Navajo tribal parks are not able to open until the Navajo Nation is in the orange phase.

"I am sure individuals like Mr. Begaye (Parks and Recreation Manager Martin Begaye) receive a lot of criticism, considering the dire impact that Covid-19 is having on our people and economy. But he, too, is doing his best to protect the public by following the heath command oversight," Nez said.

Nez recalled witnessing a Navajo family lose their truck in New Mexico and suggested a work session with the Navajo Nation Department of Justice be held to address the Navajo Nation's protections from such seizure laws.

"While the border town businesses are thriving, our people are having to choose between an electric bill and their dinner and I feel for them," Freeland said . "We need to take more steps to consider phase plans to rebuild our economy. This virus has killed so many dreams and many of these businesses are closing for good."

Council Delegate Kee Allen Begay Jr. (Tachee/Blue Gap, Many Farms, Nazlini, Tselani/Cottonwood, Low Mountain) reissued the call for a work session to address economic challenges as the Covid-19 pandemic continues.