

Navajo Nation celebrates liquor store closures

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NAHATA DZIIL, Ariz. – Approximately 60 community members celebrated the close of local liquor business. The participants included: Nahata Dziil Chapter officials, Navajo Nation Council members, Navajo Nation Human Rights Commission, and Apache County Board of Supervisor Barry Weller gathered at Nahata Dziil Chapter on Sept. 3. President Russell Begaye signed off on documents to finalize the purchase of three separate properties, on which Ole Red Barn Liquor, High Country Liquor, and Lee's Liquor once operated near the community of Nahata Dziil.

The celebratory event marked the culmination of years of collaborative efforts to close the liquor establishments that have plagued surrounding Navajo communities and have led to disproportionate levels of crime including, assaults, thefts, sexual assaults, and homicides.

Council Delegate Raymond Smith, Jr. (Houck, Klagetoh, Nahata Dziil, Tsé Si áni, Wide Ruins), who represents several communities that have been impacted by the liquor businesses, commended local community members who formed the Renewal of Hope Task Force to work with tribal, county, and state officials to shut down the businesses.

“The permanent shutdown of the local liquor establishments resulted from the perseverance of the local people and this moves us a step toward restoring harmony amongst our communities,” he Smith.

Smith added that the closure of the businesses allows them to pursue positive economic opportunities that will help the communities.

“The people want businesses that are beneficial such as restaurants and grocery stores,” Smith said.

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In March 2014, chair of the Renewal of Hope Task Force Char James, came before the Council's Naabik'iyáti' Committee to request the assistance of the Council to urge county and state officials to deny the renewal of four liquor licenses for the former owner, Gary McDonald.

McDonald, who was facing several felony charges including weapons and drug charges related to the sale of methamphetamine in nearby communities, later attempted to sell the licenses to an associate prior to pleading guilty to the felony charges.

In response, Council members unanimously approved a resolution urging the Apache County Board of Supervisors, the Arizona Department of Liquor Licenses and Control, the Arizona State Liquor Board, and all other appropriate agencies to reject the renewal or transfer of the liquor licenses MacDonald. Along with that resolution, Council members issued a directive to the Office of the Speaker and the Navajo Nation Human Rights Commission to ensure that the licenses were not renewed or transferred.

In January, Speaker LoRenzo Bates (Nenahnezad, Newcomb, San Juan, Tiis Tsoh Sikaad, Tse'Daa'Kaan, Upper Fruitland) and Council members arranged for the transportation of 80 community members to attend a hearing in Phoenix in which the Arizona Liquor Board considered and unanimously denied the sale of the liquor licenses from McDonald to his associate.

Bates commended the various groups for working together and expending a tremendous amount of time and resources to ensure that Navajo communities are safer, while adding he supports the community's will to use the property for a meaningful purpose.

"For years and decades, our people have been victimized by the local liquor establishments and I stand with you and congratulate your community for ensuring that the victimization of this community ends," he said.

Council Delegate Leonard Tsosie (Baca/Prewitt, Casamero Lake, Counselor, Littlewater, Ojo Encino, Pueblo Pintado, Torreon, Whitehorse Lake) was also in attendance and recalled the pleas of the task force members when they came before the Naabik'iyáti' Committee last March

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and said the efforts of the community should serve as an example for other communities.

“When you came to Council it was not looking good and I am glad to see you happy once again,” Delegate Tsosie said. “The people are happy and that’s what matters.”

Nahata Dził Commission president Darryl Ahasteen thanked all of the groups for their assistance and said the chapter looks forward to developing positive businesses, adding that the commission is currently working toward establishing themselves as a township.

“This was team work and not the result of one individual,” said Ahasteen.

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