

Written by gallupsun

Thursday, 23 November 2023 12:04

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WINDOW ROCK, Ariz. — The 25th Navajo Nation Speaker Crystalyne Curley and members of the Navajo Nation Council met with newly-appointed acting Navajo Area Bureau of Indian Affairs Regional Director Deborah Shirley to coordinate continued Navajo Nation priorities Nov. 20.

On Nov. 15, BIA Deputy Director for Field Operations, Bartholomew Stevens, issued a letter informing Navajo Nation leadership that the previous BIA Navajo Area Regional Director, Gregory Mehojah, would begin a 120-day detail to support the Office of Facilities, Property, and Safety Management.

Stevens selected Shirley to serve a 120-day detail as the acting Navajo Area BIA Regional Director. She previously served as the BIA Regional Director for Trust Services for the Western Region.

“Thank you for the opportunity to come and sit before you. I am more than willing to work with you. Coming from a BIA background, I believe in upholding our trust responsibilities to tribes and to be of service to the Navajo Nation,” Shirley said. “We have a heavy load, and it takes teamwork. One hundred and twenty days is a small window, and it will go by fast. I’ll do my best.”

In attendance for the meeting were Council Delegate Rickie Nez (T’iistoh Sikaad, Nenahnezad, Upper Fruitland, Tse’ Daa’ Kaan, Newcomb, San Juan), Council Delegate Shaandiin Parrish (Chilchinbeto, Dennehotso, Kayenta), Council Delegate Seth Damon (Baahaali, Chilchiltah, Manuelito, Red Rock, Rock Springs, Tsayatoh), Council Delegate Casey Allen Johnson (Cameron, Coalmine Canyon, Birdsprings, Leupp, Tolani Lake), and Council Delegate Shawna Ann Claw (Chinle). Council Delegate Dr. Andy Nez (Crystal, Fort Defiance, Red Lake, Sawmill) was represented by his Legislative District Assistant Amber Benallie.

Curley welcomed Shirley and said that she wants to keep the momentum moving forward on issues and priorities that the Navajo Nation Council’s standing committees are working to advance.

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“We want to make sure that you understand the priorities that we are working on regarding issues like the American Rescue Plan Act projects and the reissuing of grazing permits on Navajo Partitioned Lands,” Speaker Curley said.

Nez called upon the BIA to help address obstacles that hinder progress for ARPA projects. Many of these obstacles deal with obtaining Right of Way approvals or Tribal Access Authorizations.

“The time is coming up here. We need these monies to be obligated. This is where we need the help of the BIA,” Nez said. “We need the BIA to help RDC come up with solutions to move these projects forward.”

Damon advocated on behalf of the Eastern Navajo Agency, where he said the communities face land status issues that complicate the issuances of ROWs.

“It takes anywhere from a day to 45 days to get a ROW in big Navajo,” he said. “In Eastern Navajo, it can take from 14 months to two-and-a-half years. Give us back our rights for right-of-ways and to issue our own grazing permits.”

Claw stressed the importance of intergovernmental relationships and called for the relinquishment of chapter lands that are still maintained by the BIA. Claw said the high turnover with the Navajo Area BIA Regional Director position within recent years has caused many of her constituents to question the stability and progress of the BIA’s Gallup office.

“With the Resources and Development Committee, we are addressing issues like abandoned uranium mines, Tribal Access Authorizations, and grazing permits,” Claw said. “We need your participation in meetings that address Navajo Partitioned Lands permits. If we’re not able to have you aid our requests, the RDC will have to go to the congressional level.”

Shirley said that many of these priorities are on her radar and were discussed within the Navajo Area BIA Office upon her arrival.

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“We’re working on issues regarding fee to trust lands or acceptance of conveyance. We’re also moving forward on addressing sand and gravel pits for the Navajo Nation,” Shirley said. “We see that ARPA projects have stringent timelines that the Navajo Nation needs assistance with. When the whole package is put together, we can get these things pushed through.”

Parrish thanked Shirley for making her introduction to the 25th Navajo Nation Council.

“We need your support and your voice at the federal level. If you’re committed to helping our initiatives, you’ll listen to the Council,” she said. “The BIA should do all it can to support Navajo initiatives at the federal level.”

