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Utah Legislature passes 2-year extension of two Navajo Trust Fund programs

[Blanding, Utah] – The Utah State Legislature has passed Senate Bill 237, which provides for the continuation of college level financial aid to Utah Navajo students and the continued use of funds for pre-approved housing and other projects until 2012. Governor Gary R. Herbert signed this legislation into law on March 25, 2010.

“We were happy to work on this bill. It was the right thing to do and now the Utah Navajos can continue their education and complete badly needed housing projects for another two years,” said David Hinkins (R) Orangeville, sponsor of the bill. “As a former education administrator, it’s satisfying to see our efforts resulting in meeting some of the educational needs of our Navajo constituents” said Christine Watkins (D) Price, who managed the bill in the House of Representatives.

The State of Utah-Navajo Trust Fund (UNTF) administered these programs until 2008, when the UNTF was dissolved. A transition organization – the Navajo Royalties Holding Fund (UNRHF) – was established to administer the fund until a new trustee is designated by the U.S. Congress.

The UNRHF was scheduled to wind down college financial aid to new college students by June, 2010, but now the UNRHF will continue to serve Utah Navajo students for the next two years or until a new trustee takes over, whichever comes first. “This is good news,” said Marilyn Holiday, Education Specialist with UNRHF. She added “A lot of the mothers of students were worried that their high school sophomores and juniors would not get this assistance but now they can, at least for another two years.”

UNRHF had advised parents that high school seniors graduating during the spring of 2010 should get into college right away so that they can become eligible for the UNRHF college financial aid cut-off date of June 30, 2010. Now, however, new students intending to use UNRHF college financial aid monies can enter college during fall semester, and not need to rush into college during the summer.

“Nizhoni!” (meaning “good” or “excellent” in the Navajo language) says Ed Tapaha with a big smile on his face. “Now they can take a breather from school during the summer before they buckle down for college in the fall.” Mr. Tapaha is a former UNTF Dineh Committee member, works for San Juan County as the Navajo Liaison, and is the current

Chair of the Native American Scholarship Committee at the Utah State University-
College of Eastern Utah..

SB 237 also authorizes the unspent balances of housing and community development grants previously approved by the former UNTF Board of Trustees to continue to be used for the originally-approved projects. Authority to expend these funds had expired on January 01, 2010, but SB 237 extended the expiration date to January 01, 2012.

“We worked hard to get this legislation through“ exclaimed Kenneth Maryboy, San Juan County Commssioner, and Davis Filfred, both also serving as Delegates on the Navajo Nation Council, “because not everyone was able to finish their projects by the January 01, 2010 deadline. We weren’t asking for additional new monies, but just to use up what was already approved . It would have been a shame if the Utah Navajos couldn’t use up what was already approved to them.”

Herman Farley, Red Mesa Chapter President, added his appreciation to everyone who helped, “I want to thank my own Chapter and all the Utah Navajo Chapters who submitted resolutions, our Council Delegates, the Navajo Utah Commission, David Hinkins and Christine Watkins, the Governor, and the state legislature to make this happen.”