

Effort to save old Fort Wingate buildings gaining support

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SPECIAL TO THE TIMES

FORT WINGATE, N.M. – The effort to save the old school buildings at Fort Wingate from being torn down is now in high gear.

Both Martin Link, former director of the Navajo Tribal Museum, and Edmund Yazzie, a member of the Navajo Nation Council representing Church Rock, Iyanbito, Mariano Lake, Pinedale, Smith Lake and Thoreau, have traveled the Eastern Navajo Agency in recent weeks getting chapter support for the project.

All of the chapters voted for resolutions of support as did the entire Eastern Navajo Agency Council.

“There was really no opposition,” said Link, except for one or two people in one of the chapters who always vote “no” on any resolution.

Yazzie agreed, saying that the support for the project in the Eastern Navajo Agency was universal.

The idea started almost a year ago when Link learned that the U.S. Bureau of Indian Affairs was preparing to tear down some 30 or so buildings that in the past were used for schools but have been abandoned for years after replacements for them were built.

The buildings were, for the most part, in good shape, said Link, which got him to thinking that they could be converted into a series of museums that would attract people from all over the world.

One museum, he said, could focus on life on an Army fort, another could showcase BIA education over the years, the Navajo Code Talkers could take one of the buildings for a Code Talker Museum and so on.

In speeches at the various chapters, Link pointed out that the original 29 Code Talkers were recruited and sworn in at Fort Wingate. Also, the military post was where Navajo army scouts were stationed in the late 1880s.

But to do this he had to convince the BIA not to tear down the buildings, which proved to be a harder challenge than he expected since the funds for demolition had already been appropriated.

So far he has been successful in stopping the demolition but Link said the BIA could decide at any time to go ahead, which is why he is trying to get the project approved as quickly as possible.

The idea, he said, is to have the buildings turned over to the National Park Service, which would preserve them. And one way of doing this, said Yazzie, is to get them declared historic buildings, which would save them from destruction.

That’s the intent of the resolution that has been going around to the chapters for approval.

Just recently, the McKinley County Commission approved the resolution, calling for the transfer of the buildings as well as some 500 acres to the National Park Service as a national monument.

Yazzie said the stage is now set to bring the resolution to members of the Navajo Nation Council, possibly as early as the winter session in January, to get its approval for the project.

The fact that all of the chapters have supported the idea as well as the Eastern Navajo Agency Council is expected to go a long way towards getting Council approval, said Yazzie.