

N20 (U.S. 89T) groundbreaking slated for June 9



Construction activities on Navajo Route 20 officially began on May 28 by the Arizona Department of Transportation. ADOT selected FNF Construction, Inc. as the contractor to complete the project by mid-August. Upon completion, N20 will be designated as U.S. 89T and will begin receiving traffic. (Photo by Rick Abasta)

After months of planning and negotiations, the Navajo Division of Transportation and Arizona Department of Transportation are ready to break ground on Navajo Route 20.

The groundbreaking ceremony for the paving construction of N20 will take place at 11 a.m. (DST) on June 9 at Tsinaabaas Habitiin Elementary School in Bodaway-Gap.

On May 28, ADOT officially began construction activities on N20.

The \$35 million project will pave a 28-mile portion of dirt road, which travels from Bodaway-Gap north through Coppermine and ending in LeChee.

N20 stretches a total length of 44-miles and has connected all three Navajo communities for over 40 years. Navajo community members are excited about the road construction after decades of traveling rough

road conditions.

The construction project is eligible for reimbursement through the Federal Highway Administration's emergency relief program, which funds the repairs of roadways damaged by natural disasters.

Upon completion of paving, N20 will be designated as U.S. 89T and will serve as a temporary detour route for traffic from U.S. 89. After the reconstruction of U.S. 89 is complete, the newly-paved U.S. 89T will be returned to the Bureau of Indian Affairs.

ADOT closed U.S. 89 on Feb. 20, after a dry slide occurred and damaged the roadway near Bitter Springs.

ADOT expects construction on U.S. 89T to be completed in mid-August to receive traffic.

NDOT, ADOT, FHWA and Bureau of Indian Affairs have been working together since the closure of U.S. 89 to utilize N20 as a detour route.

"The paving of 28-miles of

dirt road for use as an emergency detour route is unprecedented for Indian Country," said Paulson Chaco, director of NDOT. "We have worked closely with ADOT and our other partners to realize this project."

Immediately after the road closure, Navajo Nation President Ben Shelly directed NDOT to work with ADOT on the possibility of paving N20 as an alternative detour route.

On Feb. 24, Shelly and Navajo Nation Executive Branch leadership organized a meeting at Bodaway-Gap Chapter and met with residents affected by the road closure.

"We have followed President Shelly's directive and here we are three-months later, with a groundbreaking ceremony scheduled and construction underway," Chaco said.

NDOT assisted ADOT with the expedient processing of a temporary construction easement for construction. The

lengthy tribal process typically takes months and even years to complete.

ADOT's easement was processed within weeks through assistance from tribal departments and the BIA.

Chaco said the cooperation between NDOT and ADOT has been a great working relationship and he is optimistic the collaboration will lead to other opportunities to improve the transportation system on the Navajo Nation.

Currently, motorists are traveling a 115-mile detour, driving east on U.S. 160 to State Route 98 north for access to and from Page. The U.S. 89T detour route will reduce travel time and mileage to Page by half.

Festivities for the groundbreaking ceremony are scheduled to begin at 11 a.m. with chapter officials from Bodaway-Gap, Coppermine and LeChee.

President Shelly will provide the opening statement. Arizona State Representative Jamescita Peshlakai (D-Dist. 7) will also be in attendance.

An overview of the project will be provided by Paulson Chaco of NDOT, Sharon Pinto from the BIA Navajo Region, Jennifer Toth of ADOT, and Karla Petty from the FHWA.

Additional speakers include Navajo Nation Council delegate Duane Tsinigine (Bodaway-Gap, Coppermine, Kaibeto, LeChee, Red Lake-Tonalea) and members of the Resources and Development Committee. Coconino County Supervisor Lena Fowler is also scheduled to attend.

Information:

www.navajodot.org or
www.azdot.gov/us89