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## **Commissioners express frustration with Chaco Canyon road debate**

— By Cornelia de Bruin — The Daily Times  
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AZTEC — San Juan County Commissioners are at their wits' end about needed improvements they want to make to Chaco Road — the road leading into Chaco Culture National Historical Park.

Layers of government bureaucracies, federal and tribal, are shackling commissioners' best intent in wanting to improve the road for the residents whose properties front it.

Chaco Road leads to Chaco Culture park, a National Historical Park, and also to Chaco Canyon, which is itself a World Heritage Site.

The badly eroded and washboarded road lays atop soft sand, a combination of driver hazards lending itself to unsafe driving conditions, bone jarring bumps and loss of vehicular control at some speeds.

But what started out as a response to residents' pleas for a safer road has morphed into a complex and possibly circular environmental assessment process that likely would not result in the Finding of No Significant Impact, or FONSI, which is a ruling commissioners hope to get so they can proceed.

"Little did I know we'd get put into a complicated environmental assessment on square one," said David Keck, the county's director of Public Works. "We've already spent \$337,000 and if we get a FONSI, we could go into the design and construction of the project, but I don't know what the designation will be."

The last three miles of the road lay on Navajo Nation land, which offers San Juan County no chance of right-of-way options. Simply trying to obtain easements could cost the county as much as \$100,000, plus the cost of a survey that's estimated at \$52,000 more.

"We already have to do a \$200,000 match, so we already have a \$1 million project," Keck said. "Chip sealing the road would make it a \$3.5 million project."

Keck referred to the rapid escalation of materials costs for the project.

The county fears its first attempt to obtain an environmental assessment could kick back to the need for a second.

"This could turn into an endless loop, and we need direction," he said.

Added County Manager Keith Johns, "I don't think we'll get a FONSI, so that just gives us more inflation (in costs). I don't think we can move this project forward. We could spend all our money on an Environmental Impact Statement and not get any

favorable ruling."

Commissioner Ervin Chavez, whose constituents also live on Navajo Nation land, said some of the road's residents suggested the county cut its losses and simply stabilize the existing road.

"It's also frustrating working with the Navajo departmental people who play the right-of-way game with us," he said. "The (Navajo) department won't approve an easement when the road has already been there for 100 years."

Chavez is frustrated.

"Why don't we let the Nation and the Park Service take care of the road after Chaco Wash, and simply abandon the rest of it?" he asked.

Commissioners greeted Chavez' suggestion with interest. Chairman Tony Atkinson suggested, though, that simply graveling the road would result in washboarding and "snot in the winter."

"The whole project is frustrating. This money was appropriated 25 years ago and now it's not available because of lots of vested interests and red tape,"

Commissioner James Henderson said. "This is simple blackmail."

Henderson then launched into a tirade about how the federal government and its regulations dictate to local officials such as the county how they can and cannot proceed with their work.

"(The U.S.) Congress has mandated that we work at the local level, but these agencies don't cooperate," Henderson said. "This has jumped off track. It's gone too far."

Commissioners agreed to pursue what they call "a lesser FONSI" ruling that would enable them to improve the road, and consider abandoning the rest of it at a later date.

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