

# GRAND CANYON TRUST

## Save the Confluence Campaign Update: June-July, 2014

[Save the Confluence](#) is a group of local families from the Bodaway/Gap Chapter of the Navajo Nation who are opposing plans to build a large destination resort on the remote East Rim of Grand Canyon and a gondola ride down to the confluence of the Colorado and Little Colorado rivers.<sup>1</sup> In 2012, Grand Canyon Trust accepted their [invitation](#) to join the campaign to oppose [Grand Canyon Escalade](#). This update summarizes some of the significant events during the summer of 2014.<sup>2</sup>

### Developers Push for Final Approval

According to Scottsdale developer R. Lamar Whitmer, the idea for building a gondola into Grand Canyon began in 2009. Elements of the proposal were eventually shaped into a [Memorandum of Understanding](#), signed by Navajo Nation President Ben Shelly and development partner Albert Hale on February 21, 2012. Negotiations among invited insiders followed. More than two years later, developers planned to push for final approval by the Navajo Nation Council during its 2014 summer session.

On June 10, 2014, Escalade developers posted the following [statement](#) on their website:

*"A final package of legislation was delivered to the Navajo Nation Council Office of Legislative Affairs. From there it has moved on to the Speakers Office, is being assigned a legislation number and is being assigned to committees for review, debate and hopefully approval...."*

This pronouncement<sup>3</sup> and well-financed publicity campaign led many to believe that it

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<sup>1</sup> For more information, please see: [Proposed development to transport visitors from rim of Grand Canyon to the Canyon floor](#); [Bodaway/Gap families continue battle against Escalade project](#); [Will Navajos approve a Grand Canyon megadevelopment?](#); [Grand Canyon Escalade Project Presses Forward](#) ; [The Escalade Project and GCT: Front Page News](#); [Save the Confluence continues opposition to the Escalade project in 2013](#)

<sup>2</sup> While working in support of the Confluence families to stop the project, our team is also collaborating with community groups to help craft [alternative economic development strategies](#) that would bring much-needed jobs to this area of the Navajo Nation without threatening national park resources, sacred sites, or traditional culture. This community-based effort is a public process that continues as Escalade developers pursue private agreements between powerful allies who stand to profit from the proposed project.

was a “done deal.” Reporter Katherine Locke [wrote](#): “R. Lamar Whitmer, managing partner of Confluence Partners, said over the last year and a half he believes opposition to the project from Navajos has lessened...‘Our documents are in the legislative process with the Nation and we’re hopeful to have the Council act on it in June or July.’” But that optimism faded by mid-July.

The Navajo Council’s Naabik’iyati Committee heard a report from Save the Confluence representatives on June 13. Delores Wilson-Aguirre, Pauline Martin Sanchez, and other family members presented their case against Escalade and received a generally positive reception. But Hopi Tribal Chairman Herman Honanie stirred controversy when the Speaker Pro Temp invited him to speak for two minutes. He reported that the Hopi Council had passed a resolution opposing the proposed Escalade Project because any development of this sacred area would violate religious teachings of Hopi people. Navajo Council delegate Leonard Tsosie led a successful vote against accepting the Chairman’s report because it was not on the agenda.

Nonetheless, the Committee [voted](#) to accept Save the Confluence’s report, which concluded with a plea “... to put a stop to this nonsense. We ask you to save the confluence and the people who have been trying to make a home since exiled. Bring all stakeholders together...the children and grandchildren. We have suffered enough. We want justice, protection for sacred sites. Thank you.”

On June 25, developers published a [full-page ad](#) in the *Navajo-Hopi Observer*. It attacked “Save the Confluence” families for protesting and putting up signs, instead of “working together” to “create jobs” and “a better future for the people of Western Navajo.” The ad also asked readers to call upon “your Council Delegate to move to approve Grand Canyon Escalade.” It promised 3,500 jobs but offered no details about negotiated agreements with President Shelly’s office.

Two days later, Escalade developers appeared before the June 27<sup>th</sup> meeting of Navajo Council’s Naabik’iyati Committee. Mike Lee (architect), Albert Hale (legal advisor), Keith A. Lamparter (design and construction manager), and R. Lamar Whitmer (managing partner) reported that they had completed negotiations with the Navajo Nation and were ready for legislation to be presented for Council approval.

Save the Confluence families, Hopi cultural preservation director Leigh Kuwanwisiwma, and former Hopi Chairman Vernon Masayesva were among Escalade opponents in the audience. Council delegates Dwight Witherspoon, Mel Begay, and Jonathan Nez asked difficult questions of the presenters, including “what are the details of the agreement...and how much of the revenues go back to the communities?” Even sympathetic delegate Leonard Tsosie complained about the lack

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<sup>3</sup> Contrary to Escalade developers’ statement, the legislation and negotiated agreements had not been released for public review as of 8/11/14. No delegate has stepped forward to sponsor a supporting resolution or legislation before the Navajo Nation Council. The bill was not assigned a number. Committees have not reviewed it, nor was it placed in the agenda for the summer session (July 21-25).

of transparency: “Every day that you do not give us the agreement, then you are losing my vote...I don’t want to continue the agitation at Bodaway....Give us a proposal in 30 days.”<sup>4</sup>

Renaë Yellowhorse attended the presentation. She was [shocked](#): “There was no substance. There was no information. There was nothing they could go on.” Instead, Confluence Partner Albert Hale listed the social ills of Bodaway/Gap Chapter and how Escalade jobs would solve those problems. As an example of the kind of interpretive center they were planning, developers showed a film about the Polynesian Cultural Center in Hawaii, on which Confluence Partner Mike Lee had worked.<sup>5</sup>

Furthermore, Yellowhorse [said](#) no one in Bodaway/Gap Chapter, where Escalade would be located, knew about the negotiations. “DOJ was there, NTUA was there, all these entities,” she said. “The closest stakeholders were not invited. Our chapter president was not even aware there were negotiations going on.” As for Escalade developers, “It’s time for them to share the information,” she said. “It’s time for them to be transparent. It’s time for them to come back to Bodaway/Gap Chapter and heal the rift they’ve caused in the community.”

### Momentum Shifts

For more than two years, Save the Confluence families actively solicited opposition to Escalade from Navajo Nation citizens, Council delegates, and political candidates running for office. They used Facebook and other social media to spread the word about Escalade’s threats to culture, community, and environment. But until the presentation by developers to the Naabik’iyati Committee, momentum seemed to be flowing in Escalade’s favor.

Tough questions from delegates during the June 27<sup>th</sup> presentation revealed that negotiators had not disclosed terms of the proposed agreement to the Navajo Nation Council. Residents, grazing lease holders, chapter officials, religious leaders, and key agencies such as Navajo Parks and Recreation and Historical Preservation Office were left out of the process. As Navajo citizens alerted to the fact that decisions were being made without their consent, U.S. citizens learned that developers were planning to build an amusement ride into one of our nation’s most treasured national parks.

Over the Fourth of July weekend, Pulitzer Prize winning journalist Julie Cart’s front-page [article](#) in Sunday’s *Los Angeles Times* spawned a series of high-profile stories in national and international media. Grand Canyon National Park Superintendent Dave Uberuaga cited Escalade and the proposed Tusayan development as the most

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<sup>4</sup> Please see: <http://www.dineresourcesandinfocenter.org/youtube-video-navajo-council-hears-proposed-grand-canyon-escalade-project-report-june-27-2014-part-1/>; <http://www.dineresourcesandinfocenter.org/youtube-video-naabikiyati-committee-hears-proposed-grand-canyon-escalade-project-report-6-27-14-part-2/>; <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Aw1rFsI6WMo>

<sup>5</sup> The [Polynesian Cultural Center](#) was opened by the the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter Day Saints on October 12, 1963 and occupies 42 acres owned by nearby Brigham Young University.

“serious threats” the park has faced in its 95-year history. Lamar Whitmer countered that the park service offers visitors nothing more than “a drive-by wilderness experience....We want them to feel the canyon from the bottom.” Presumably, riding a gondola down to a riverside walkway and snack bar offers a more meaningful way to experience the Grand Canyon.

Southern California Public Radio [interviewed](#) Deswood Tome, who spoke in support of the Escalade development. As Special Adviser to President Shelly, Tome challenged the National Park Service’s opposition: “Don’t tell the Navajo Nation what we can do and what we can’t do. You stick over there on your side, and we’ll do what we want to do on our side.” Others interviewed included Kevin Dahl, from National Parks Conservation Association, Renae Yellowhorse, and Grand Canyon Trust’s Deon Ben, who called in to the live broadcast.

During a CBS Morning News [report](#) the following Monday, Superintendent Uberuaga said: “I am the steward of this national park. It is my responsibility to preserve and protect Grand Canyon for future generations.” Lamar Whitmer dismissed opponents to the proposed gondola as “elitist” for wanting to limit access to only a “select few.” The television news report concluded with Save the Confluence spokesperson Renae Yellowhorse asking: “Is there any amount of money that people would take to sell their sacred places? No, it’s priceless.”

The week prior to the July 21<sup>st</sup> opening of the Navajo Council’s summer session began with Save the Confluence family members Wilson O. Wilson, Darlene Martin, Delores Wilson-Aguirre, and others speaking in a two-hour broadcast over KTNN , the most widely listened to radio station on the Navajo reservation. Deon Ben moderated the radio program, which was mainly in the Navajo language. They shared personal experiences about stress and turmoil caused by the divisive proposal.

The radio broadcast included respected elder Mary Martin’s voice scolding Whitmer’s band of bilagáana developers and shaming Navajo enablers for selling out their communities and culture. Listeners were urged to call their Council delegates to oppose Escalade. Feedback to the program flooded in: phone calls, personal thanks, and praise in cyberspace rippled across the reservation. It was strong, emotional, and overwhelmingly against Escalade.

Following the KTNN program, Save the Confluence families [published](#) two full-page ads, one in the *Navajo-Hopi Observer* and another in the *Navajo Times*. Among the questions the ad asked was: “Where is the final package of legislation that Confluence Partners said they delivered to the Navajo Nation Council Office of Legislative Affairs on June 10, 2014?” It recalled that Escalade’s memorandum with Ben Shelly said if the Master Agreement is not executed “by July 1, 2013,” then the relationship with the Nation “shall terminate without further action.”

Reporter Cindy Yurth’s front page [story](#) in the Thursday, July 17<sup>th</sup> edition of *Navajo Times* began: “Contrary to information on the developers’ website, a bill committing

the Navajo Nation to partner on a resort on the rim of the Little Colorado Canyon has not reached the speaker's office and will not be on the Navajo Nation Council's summer session agenda." On the back page of the same section of the paper was the Save the Confluence families' full-page ad. Its headline read, "Why are profiteers still pushing Grand Canyon Escalade?" It also asked, "Where is the solid public support President Shelly said he needed before December 31, 2012?"

That same day, soon after Yurth's story broke, an [Indian Country Today](#) headline appeared: "Controversial Grand Canyon Gondola Grounded for a Year." Lamar Whitmer said "Because we haven't been able to get to the Council in a timely fashion, the opening will be pushed back until May 2018." The previous opening date was the summer of 2017. Whitmer added, "It's disappointing, having gotten to know the people in the area and the need that exists in western Navajo for jobs and economic opportunity."

Not buying Whitmer's empathy, Renae Yellowhorse [criticized](#) the developer's concept for an interpretive center: "If that's the kind of Disneyland-like thing he wants to bring to the edge of the Grand Canyon, no. That's not how we want our stories told. We're here. We're not a story from the 1800s. We're not Pocahontas on the Rim. It was offensive."

On July 18, the day after Escalade developers announced a delay in plans, Hopi, Zuni, and Navajo leaders traveled to the Confluence area.<sup>6</sup> Hopi Tribal Chairman Herman Honanie [said](#) to the Escalade opposition group that he wanted to clarify where the Hopi Tribe stands on the project: "With the Hopi Council's backing, I and Vice Chairman Alfred Lomaquahu have invited both Navajo Nation President Ben Shelly and their council members to sit down with us at our Hopi headquarters to discuss this Confluence project....So far Shelly has not even responded in any way to our invitation or even to our formal opposition letters regarding the project sent to his office." The invitation was also extended to Albert Hale and Lamar Whitmer.

The summer session of the Navajo Nation began the following Monday, July 21. As is customary on opening day, Council delegates introduced members of the audience.<sup>7</sup> Delegate and a leading presidential contender Russell Begaye warmly welcomed Mary Martin and Save the Confluence members by name, followed by a burst of applause from the audience. Escalade developers Albert Hale and Lamar Whitmer were noticeably absent, as additional Council members acknowledged Earlene Reid, Renae Yellowhorse, and other opposition family members in attendance.

### Looking Ahead

As of this update, Escalade developers' most recent [public statement](#) was printed in

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<sup>6</sup> To hear Laurel Morales' report on NPR's *Morning Edition*, please visit:

<http://www.npr.org/2014/08/04/337144825/proposed-gondola-for-grand-canyons-rim-has-community-on-edge>

<sup>7</sup> <http://www.ustream.tv/recorded/50346329>; <http://www.ustream.tv/channel/navajo-nation-council>

full-page ad in the July 24<sup>th</sup> *Navajo Times*. It said:

*Over the last 4½ years we have invested more than \$3½ million of time and money to get the Grand Canyon Escalade resolution and agreements ready for a Navajo Nation Council vote....[In 2012, President Shelly] signed a nonexclusive MOU to negotiate for the building and running of Escalade. Over the next 2 years the project design was refined, and the Master Agreement, along with the Development and Operating Agreements were hammered out. The land use revenue to the Nation will start at 8% of gross revenues and then go up to 18% as visitor attendance increases (this is more than 3 times what the operator pays at Grand Canyon National Park). The Nation will also receive a significant amount of sales and hotel taxes from the project....We had hoped the Council would have voted before the end of July so that Escalade could have opened in May 2017, but because of delays the best we can expect is May 2018. Hopefully the Council will act soon and not risk another year of payroll for all those living in the Bennett Freeze.*

The advertisement repeats well-worn talking points and provides few new details about negotiated agreements. It chastises the Council for delays, while seeking its approval. It asks citizens to embrace Escalade on face value and urges immediate approval to keep the project on schedule.

We don't know exactly why Escalade developers have failed (thus far) to tee up a resolution before the Navajo Nation Council. Some delegates are concerned about massive subsidies that developers are demanding to pay for water, roads, electricity, and other essentials. With August primaries and the general election slated for November, President Shelly may now view Escalade as a liability to his re-election. Resistance within permitting agencies and potential threats of lawsuits could also be factors. In any case, the Save the Confluence campaign appears to be having an effect.

Will Escalade developers overpower local opposition, traditional uses, and emerging efforts for community-driven economic development? Can the canyon (and our planet) survive self-proclaimed saviors whose promises of prosperity are mere alibis for short-term profits? And when they go away, who will be next?

*"There will always be people who are eager to sell the lie that providing universal access to fragile terrain where beauty and solitude still flourish does nothing to diminish the qualities that make those places so special."<sup>8</sup>*

Our story is never over. Thanks to grandmothers and grass-root activists who are making a difference. Thanks to river runners, canyon lovers, and advocates

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<sup>8</sup> Editors cut this sentence from Kevin Fedarko's August 10, 2014 editorial in the *New York Times*. Please see <http://www.nytimes.com/2014/08/10/opinion/sunday/two-development-projects-threaten-the-grand-canyon.html?smid=tw-share>

everywhere.

Please keep supporting [Save the Confluence](#).

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