

Building Communities: Transformative Achievements Across the Navajo Nation

A Success Story of Planning, Partnership, and Long-Term Nation Building

For more than a decade, Building Communities has supported the Navajo Nation, Chapters and people to advance proactive planning, economic revitalization, housing expansion, and intergovernmental collaboration. Through strategic planning, Chapter empowerment, and sustained presence, Building Communities has helped position the Navajo Nation for major federal investment, water rights progress, and long-term economic sovereignty.

This case study highlights key achievements—including projects, plans, legislation, and initiatives—that have reshaped the trajectory of Navajo communities and created a long-term foundation for economic and community development.

Building Communities Impact

1. Facilitated **nation-wide summit** and **authored plan** unlocking Navajo trust funds
2. Provided **technical leadership** and created recovery-focused **Navajo Thaw Regional Plan**
3. **Designed chapter-level recovery planning** model enabling local economic action
4. Enabled **Navajo-led business entities** and assisted the facilitation of the Echo Cliffs Master Plan
5. Produced modernization **roadmaps for Navajo business, procurement, and payment systems**
6. **Authored housing manufacturing study** grounded in Navajo Nation legislation
7. **Sponsored Relocation Summit** documenting needs and advancing housing-focused advocacy
8. Produced **Regional Recovery Plans** enabling coordinated **multi-tribal federal engagement**
9. **Provided planning framework** supporting Navajo practically irrigable acreage justification
10. Facilitated community process **crafting guiding vision** for FBFA IRMP
11. Secured rare **sub-regional CARES allocation** through legislative strategy and coordination
12. **Drafted ARPA legislation** securing sub-regional funding for modular housing delivery
13. Designed Navajo entrepreneurship training and **business planning support**
14. **Administrated skilled trades workforce training** aligned with Navajo housing priorities
15. Facilitated **chapter engagement** and **community input** for renewable energy feasibility
16. **Stabilized grants** and **produced business plan** enabling Tribal grocery store launch

1. 2012 Navajo Nation Building Summit – Unlocking Trust Fund Investment

In 2012, Building Communities was approached by the Navajo Nation to facilitate and document the Navajo Nation Building Summit, a Nation-wide convening designed to bring together leaders, community members, and stakeholders from across the Navajo Nation. The Summit's purpose was to develop a unified, actionable plan that could serve as the basis for unlocking up to \$15 million from the Navajo Nation Trust Fund to provide immediate benefits across multiple sectors of the Navajo Nation economy and governance system.

Building Communities served as the facilitator and lead documenter, ensuring that community priorities, sector-specific needs, and governance considerations were translated into a coherent and implementable framework. The process emphasized inclusive participation and alignment between grassroots input and Nation-level decision-making, resulting in a clear planning document grounded in community consensus.

The finalized Navajo Nation Building Summit Report became the formal planning foundation required to authorize the release of trust fund resources. The report was instrumental in successfully unlocking the funds, which were directed toward infrastructure improvements, housing initiatives, and economic development projects delivering immediate and measurable benefits. The Summit established an early precedent for using structured, Nation-wide planning as a tool to activate major financial resources and advance long-term capacity for the Navajo Nation.

Plan: <https://navajorenaissance.com/docs/NNB-Summit-Report-FINAL-11-01-12.pdf>

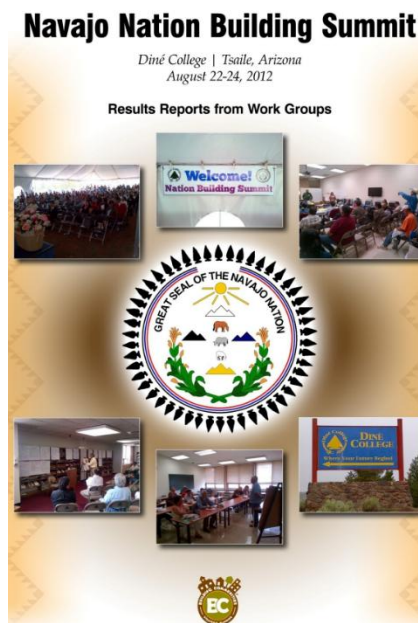
2. The BANE Project & Navajo Thaw Video Library

Building Communities served as the technical lead for the **Business Assistance for Navajo Entrepreneurs (BANE) Project**, which laid groundwork for regional recovery from the longest federal development restriction in U.S. history.

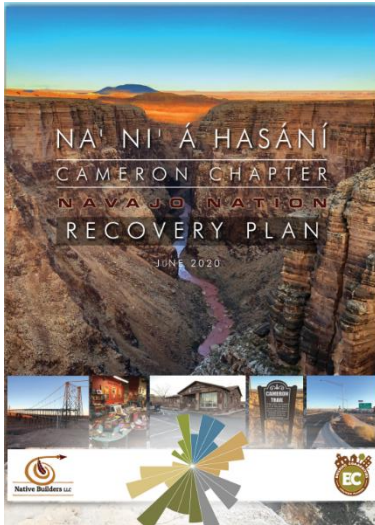
This work included creating the **Navajo Thaw Video Library**, a critical educational resource documenting recovery strategies, community priorities, and the future direction of the Former Bennett Freeze Area (FBFA).

Press Release:

<https://navajothaw.com/wp-content/uploads/2020/11/NACET-Building-Communities-Project-Announcement-Press-Release-081820-CC-Version-2.pdf>



3. Chapter Recovery Plans – A New Planning Model for the Navajo Nation



The **Chapter Recovery Plans** developed by Building Communities are the **only chapter-based economic development plans produced on the Navajo Nation in decades**. These plans redefined the role of Chapters—from passive responders to active architects of local economic futures.

Example: Cameron Chapter

Of the economic development strategies selected by the Cameron Chapter, three of them include:

- Downtown Development
- Destination Tourism
- Infrastructure Development

This led to a **USDA Rural Development RPIC application for \$250,000**, a community planning charrette, and the creation of a **conceptual master plan** focused on broadband, placemaking, and future development.

Plans: <https://navajothaw.com/recovery-plans/>

Toolkit: <https://navajothaw.com/wp-content/uploads/2023/12/EC-Placemaking-Toolkit-Manual-23-1128.pdf>

4. Coppermine Echo Cliffs Business Development Master Plan – Advancing the Vision of Thomas Tso

The Coppermine Echo Cliffs Business Development Master Plan represents not only a major strategic planning achievement, but also the fulfillment of a long-standing vision held by **Thomas Tso**, a respected Navajo leader, family man, and advocate for those impacted by the Bennett Freeze. Tom dedicated years of service to the Bodaway Gap CLUP Committee and worked tirelessly to bring new facilities, housing, and infrastructure to his community. He believed that the people of Bodaway Gap and Coppermine deserved tangible progress and the opportunity to build a better future.



Building Communities supported Tom's efforts by helping him establish **Native Builders LLC** in 2015, giving him a formal vehicle to pursue large-scale community development. Tom also served on an advisory committee to the Indian Health Service during early planning for the Bodaway Gap healthcare clinic. His vision for a thriving, self-sustaining community ultimately contributed to the formation of the Echo Cliffs project and its long-term development strategy.

This success story reflects how Building Communities helped enable a Navajo leader with a generous heart and deep commitment to his people. The Echo Cliffs Master Plan stands as a tribute to Tom's determination to respond to the Bennett Freeze in a meaningful, lasting way, and to ensure that future generations would benefit from the progress he fought for.

Plan: <https://navajothaw.com/echo-cliffs-business-development-master-plan/>

5. Reimagining Diné Government & Economy – Modernizing Navajo Business Processes

The Reimagining Diné Government & Economy project strengthened Navajo Nation business systems by identifying barriers to economic activity and recommending modern, practical solutions. Through extensive interviews, research, and inter-agency coordination, Building Communities produced a set of actionable documents that continue to shape policy discussions today.

The project resulted in three major deliverables:

1. **An online Vendor Registration System (VRS) concept and implementation roadmap**, outlining how the Navajo Nation can transition from manual, paper-based registration to a modern digital platform that improves transparency, reduces processing times, and increases accessibility for Navajo and non-Navajo vendors.
2. **A Regulatory and Governance Efficiency Report**, which clarified inefficiencies in business permitting and procurement and recommended strategies for improving fairness, predictability, and overall economic competitiveness.
3. **A Prompt Pay Reform Brief**, developed with the Diné Chamber of Commerce, documenting the economic harm caused by chronic late payments to Navajo vendors and proposing legislative and administrative reforms to ensure timely payment and strengthen the Navajo private sector.



These deliverables supported a renewed commitment within the Navajo Nation to modernize business processes, improve transparency, and remove long-standing obstacles to economic development. The work also helped precipitate broader discussions in 2025 led by the Navajo Nation Controller about using technology to streamline government operations.

Project: <https://navajothaw.com/reimagining-dine-government-and-economy/>

6. Housing Manufacturing Plan for Nahata Dziil

Building Communities completed the **Housing Manufacturing Plan for Nahata Dziil**, based on legislation the firm was directed to draft. This plan offers a long-term strategy for establishing a Navajo-operated housing manufacturing facility capable of addressing the estimated **50,000-home deficit**.

Plan: <https://navajothaw.com/wp-content/uploads/2024/08/Housing-Manufacturing-Plan-for-Nahata-Dziil-February-2024-BOOK-VERSION.pdf>



7. 2024 Relocation Summit – Navajo Housing, Relocatee Advocacy, and Setting the Stage for Long-Term Recovery

In February 2024, Building Communities supported and helped convene the Relocation Summit — a gathering of relocatee families, tribal leaders, and community advocates at Twin Arrows Navajo Casino Resort. The Summit brought renewed public focus to decades-long relocation challenges faced by Navajo and Hopi families under the original relocation framework.



The summit served as a critical forum for amplifying relocatee voices, documenting unmet needs (housing, infrastructure, utilities, access to services), and advocating for targeted government action. It helped build consensus around the necessity of housing-focused legislation, equitable resource allocation, and culturally appropriate relocation support.

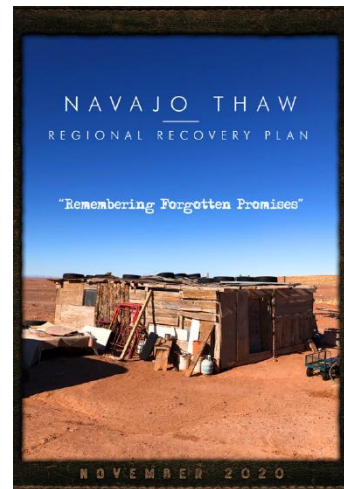
While many of the initiatives called for at the summit remain in progress, the convening itself represents a key milestone: for the first time in decades, relocatee families and tribal officials met publicly to chart a path forward. The Summit helped re-center relocatee needs within Navajo Nation policy discussions and laid groundwork for long-term housing and infrastructure recovery programs.

8. Navajo Thaw Regional Recovery Plan & Multi-Tribal Collaboration

The **Navajo Thaw Regional Recovery Plan**, produced by Building Communities, provided the federal government with the required documentation of need, economic priorities, and project pathways for the Former Bennett Freeze Area.

Recognizing that the Hopi Tribe and the San Juan Southern Paiute Tribe faced similar challenges, Building Communities expanded its planning work to all three nations—establishing a foundation for regional recovery and coordinated advocacy, similar to the collaboration demonstrated during the **Northeast Arizona Indian Water Rights Settlement Act**.

Plan: <https://navajothaw.com/wp-content/uploads/2020/navajo-thaw-recovery-plan-final.pdf>



9. Water Rights Settlement – Demonstrating Practically Irrigable Acreage (PIA)

At the time of negotiations for the Northeast Arizona Indian Water Rights Settlement Act, the Navajo Nation was required to demonstrate Practically Irrigable Acreage (PIA) in order to substantiate its present and future water needs. This showing was critical to maximizing the acreage eligible for water delivery and ensuring long-term benefits for the Navajo people.

During these discussions, the Navajo Thaw Regional Recovery Plan was referenced as a key planning document to reinforce the Nation's position. The Plan provided an evidence-based framework linking future housing, economic development, population growth, and infrastructure needs to land and water use, thereby strengthening the argument for maximizing PIA to the benefit of the Navajo Nation.

This planning-driven approach helped demonstrate that water allocations were not speculative, but grounded in realistic, community-defined development needs, supporting a stronger negotiating position for the Navajo Nation in the settlement process.

10. Integrated Resource Management Plan (IRMP) – Formation of the Vision Statement



During the initial 2014 public-input meeting for the Former Bennett Freeze Area IRMP, Building Communities was asked to facilitate the development of the core vision statement. The statement developed through this process became the guiding framework for the entire IRMP:

“A rehabilitated Former Bennett Freeze Area (FBFA) with well-managed natural resources and environmental conditions, improved economic conditions and quality of life, with preserved Diné culture and traditions.”

IRMP Document:

https://www.bia.gov/sites/default/files/dup/inline-files/2022.12.21_fbfa_irmp_final_0.pdf

11. Tolani Lake Enterprises Food & Water Project (CARES Act) – Securing One of the Only Sub-Regional Allocations

During the CARES Act emergency funding cycle, the Navajo Nation adopted its own spending legislation. This created a competitive political process in which most allocations were made Nation-wide rather than to specific communities.

Building Communities, in collaboration with Tolani Lake Enterprises and the Navajo Thaw Team, worked with the Navajo Nation Division of Natural Resources Water Management Branch to secure one of the **very few sub-regional CARES Act allocations**. This designation funded the **Tolani Lake Enterprises Food and Water Project**, which delivered water infrastructure, food security programs, and community support during the pandemic.



This outcome was achieved through precise legislative strategy, rapid coordination, and targeted advocacy on behalf of a community that otherwise would not have received a dedicated allocation.

Documentation:

<https://navajothaw.com/wp-content/uploads/2021/02/Tolani-Lake-Enterprises-Extension-Request-for-Award-No-015438.pdf>

<https://navajotimes.com/ae/community/sustenance-and-sustainability-grassroots-effort-puts-cares-act-funds-to-work-in-western-navajo/>

12. ARPA Sub-Regional Funding: CJN-29-22 Section 10 Exhibit L-4 & the Installation of 96 Modular Homes

Building Communities also played a central role in drafting **CJN-29-22 Section 10, Exhibit L-4**, which—like the CARES Act work—secured one of the **only sub-regional ARPA allocations** on the Navajo Nation. This funding supported both:

- The purchase of modular homes for the Former Bennett Freeze Area and Navajo Partitioned Lands
- Long-term planning required for the Housing Manufacturing Plan

Most ARPA funding was allocated broadly across the entire Navajo Nation. Securing a targeted, sub-region-specific allocation required strategic drafting, close coordination with the Navajo Hopi Land Commission Office, and timely advocacy.



The results were historic:

- 96 modular homes were manufactured and delivered, with installations occurring weekly across NPL communities
- The project fully utilized its budget and entered completion phases with confirmed installations
- The effort represented one of the most significant housing deployments in FBFA/NPL history

Supporting Legislation: CJN-29-22

13. Creating Navajo Jobs Through Business Training – Partnership with the Nahata Foundation



Building Communities partnered with the Nahata Foundation to implement a USDA Rural Business Development Grant (RBDG) focused on expanding entrepreneurship and job creation across the Navajo Nation. The project—*Creating Navajo Jobs Through Business Training*—responded to challenging economic conditions and the need for culturally grounded business instruction.

Following community feedback and rising health concerns, the training model was transitioned from in-person to virtual delivery, significantly increasing participation. Outreach through radio, social media, and the Navajo Thaw network led to 28 registrants and 22 attendees, representing a strong engagement rate. Training materials included a comprehensive 1,000-page business development manual, a Building Communities business plan template, and a publicly accessible training video.

Five entrepreneurs received a business plan, representing new potential enterprises in water resourcing, travel agency services, child care, handyman business, and food service.

14. Skilled Trades Workforce & Housing Repair Training – Partnership with the Nahata Foundation

Building Communities partnered with the Nahata Foundation to complete a USDA Rural Business Development Grant aimed at expanding the skilled trades workforce needed to address the Navajo Nation’s housing shortage. The program trained 10 Navajo participants in carpentry, plumbing, HVAC, electrical work, and construction management through accredited certification programs, combined



with practical hands-on training. Each participant received tuition, books, and a stipend to ensure successful completion.

The effort strengthened local workforce capacity, creating new certified trades professionals positioned to repair existing homes, construct new units, and form or expand Navajo-owned small businesses. Focused outreach in Kayenta, Dennehotso, and Chilchibeto ensured alignment with the Navajo Nation CEDS, Navajo Thaw recovery strategies, and long-term housing development goals. This partnership reduced reliance on outside contractors and built a sustainable foundation for community-based housing improvements across the Navajo Nation.

15. Progress on Pumped-Storage Hydropower: Laying the Groundwork for Renewable Energy with Rye Development

Building Communities has supported the effort by Rye Development to bring modern pumped-storage hydropower to the Navajo Nation through the Western Navajo Pumped Storage Project. Invited by the Navajo Nation to study project feasibility, Rye Development obtained the necessary permit in March 2024 to begin detailed studies, including hydrology, environmental, cultural, and community impact assessments.

During this feasibility phase, Building Communities helped facilitate chapter-level engagement by informing local communities, coordinating meetings, and gathering feedback to ensure transparency and inclusion. The proposed pumped-storage project—if developed—would offer significant long-term benefits, including thousands of family-wage construction jobs, substantial tax revenue, and funding for chapter-specific priorities.

Although the project remains under study, the progress to date—permit issuance, community engagement, and preliminary planning—represents a significant step forward. This work aligns with wider Navajo Nation goals for energy resiliency, economic diversification, and sustainable long-term development.



16. Ute Mountain Ute Tribe Market Project (Nuchu Market)

Building Communities was engaged by an engineering company serving the Ute Mountain Ute Tribe (UMUT) to stabilize and advance the Tribe’s long-planned grocery store project after multiple grants had been secured but left out of compliance and without coordinated implementation. The project addressed a critical food access gap on the UMUT reservation, which had been formally identified as a food desert, requiring Tribal members to travel long distances for basic groceries and household needs.



Building Communities assumed responsibility for managing and reconciling the secured grant portfolio, helping the Tribe bring the project back into compliance while aligning grant requirements, timelines,

and deliverables into a workable implementation strategy. In parallel, Building Communities produced the Nuchu Market Business Plan, providing a comprehensive roadmap covering market feasibility, operations, governance, financial sustainability, and community impact. The plan integrated food sovereignty goals, health outcomes, and economic development objectives while accounting for the narrow margins and operational realities of rural grocery stores.

In 2025, three years after Building Communities initial engagement, the project ultimately moved from stalled grants and uncertainty to visible on-the-ground progress, including branding, construction completion, stocking, and operational readiness of the Nuchu Market in Towaoc, Colorado. The successful transition demonstrated how coordinated grant management and disciplined business planning can convert fragmented funding into a functioning Tribal enterprise that delivers lasting benefits in food security, health, employment, and local economic circulation for the Ute Mountain Ute Tribe.

Conclusion – A Decade of Momentum and Long-Term Nation Building

From water rights to manufactured housing, from economic recovery planning to federal-level advocacy, Building Communities has delivered tools, plans, and legislative structures that Navajo leaders, Chapters, and families are using today to build their future.

The work continues—with consistency, humility, and a commitment to supporting Navajo sovereignty, self-determination, and long-term economic opportunity.