

Connecting Pine Hill Schools



Ramah-Navajo School Board President Martha Garcia addresses challenges Pine Hill students faced while attending school remotely during the pandemic. Pine Hill Schools Superintendent David Nez; Ramah-Navajo Chapter, Office of Grant and Contract, executive director Darnell J. Maria; Ramah-Navajo Chapter president David Jose and Marvin Begay are seated behind Garcia. Begay conducted a traditional prayer during the groundbreaking ceremony of a fiber optic project to connect communities in rural Pine Hill to the Internet Monday.

Pine Hill Schools leadership **break** ground for **new** fiber optic project

Pine Hill – It all started when COVID-19 pandemic hit the community of Pine Hill in the spring of 2020. All the schools on the Navajo Nation were shut down and students had to continue with their education online. The schools at Pine Hill were no exception, but as some of the most remote areas, were there's limited to no internet or even cell phone reception, students were falling behind.

“That showed in their test scores.” said Martha Garcia, the Ramah-Navajo School Board president during Monday’s groundbreaking ceremony to bring fiber optic to this rural community about 70 miles south of Gallup. “That’s what brought us together. We had to learn a new way of learning because families were sheltering at home, and we have to have our meetings, conferences, and training online – and that was a new experience.”

The need for reliable and faster Internet services is what brought the Ramah-Navajo leadership together to research services and funding opportunities.

Three years later, and many trips to Washington, D.C., and Window Rock, Arizona, to advocate for the project, the leadership has successfully acquired \$1.5 million in federal funds to run fiber optic from NM Highway 53 to Mountain View and Pine Hill; and \$6.3 million to run fiber optic from Pine Hill to Unit 4-5.



Ramah-Navajo School Board President Martha Garcia speaks with Margaret Merrill, [Co-Owner] of Oso Internet Solutions during a groundbreaking ceremony for a fiber optic project to bring high-speed internet to rural communities in the Pine Hill area Monday.



Pine Hill School IT tech Robia Adeky-Wood listens to a young participant during the groundbreaking ceremony for a fiber optic project to bring high-speed Internet to rural communities in the Pine Hill area on Monday.

Fiber Optic the best option

David Nez, the superintendent of the Pine Hill Schools said his educational staff worked with Margaret Merrill, a former teacher at Pine Hill School, and now a [Co-Owner] of Oso Internet Solutions, to provide the data needed to assist them with the complicated application process to find the fiber optic installation.

“This is all of our wins,” Merrill said during the groundbreaking ceremony. “We worked together for the greater good of everyone. This fiber that comes from Ramah is only the beginning. We have other projects that we are working on.”

Merrill said fiber optic is the best technology connecting homes in rural areas where tall trees, canyons, and mountain interfere with Wi-Fi connectivity.

Robia Adeky-Wood, the Pine Hill Schools IT tech, said that when she started to work for the schools in July 2021, teachers were using the Canvas platform to conduct classes online.

“Everybody was doing online conferencing, meeting online, and kind of like Zoom, and we had about 340 students around that time,” she said. “They were all doing this – if they could connect, and that was the challenge.”

Adeky-Wood said students in Unit 4 and 5, where there’s about 15-20 homes, couldn’t connect. “They don’t even get cellphone [reception],” she said. “It’s very rural, very hilly.”



Pine Hill residents attend a groundbreaking ceremony to bring high-speed internet to the community Monday.

Integral for law enforcement, first responders

Darnell J. Maria, the executive director of the Ramah-Navajo Office of Grants and Contracts, noted that internet connectivity and good reception is key for law enforcement and emergency personnel to respond to any incidents.

“They need to have clear communications in their radios so this is going to be very helpful and, in addition to the fiber optic, we are going to have a tower set up in Unit 5 so that is going to be more helpful for those families that might not be able to connect through fiber optic.”

Maria said the service would also allow community members to work from home, take college classes online, research business-related opportunities, and reliable Internet will help also with economic development in the area.

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