

March 25, 2021

To the North Dakota Legislature:

My name is Mike Gardner, I am the Executive Director of the Bismarck-Mandan Symphony Orchestra. We are a ND non-profit organization dedicated to enhancing the quality of life in central and western North Dakota through music with innovative artistic and educational programming.

In a normal year, we fulfill our mission through a series of concerts at the Belle Mehus theater, as well as putting on a concert and fireworks display at the State Capital for the 4th of July. This takes 1 full time employee, 5 part time employees, and over 70 paid contractors, mostly musicians. We also have a Youth Orchestra, which would normally have over 100 kids, and they perform several concerts throughout the year. For funding, we normally rely on ticket sales, donations, grants, and corporate sponsorships.

I say normally, but of course this past year has been anything but normal. The coronavirus has devastated our usual way of operating. Although we have been able to perform all of our scheduled concerts for the 2020-2021 season, it has been very different. Ticket sales have been reduced to a mere fraction of normal, and expenses are up due to the addition of live streaming. Donations are also much lower than normal due to the economic effect of the pandemic. COVID-19 has had a dramatic effect on our organization that cannot be over stated. We have had concerts in front of 50 people in a theater that seats over 800. It is not sustainable.

Through it all, what has made it worthwhile is the gratitude of the community and our patrons, and the thanks we get for continuing to bring joy through music. People have literally had tears in their eyes thanking us for doing whatever we can to continue our efforts through this all. I remember talking to Connie, who thanked me for helping her through some recent health issues, knowing she had something to look forward to. After every concert, folks remind us that what we do is important to the community. They thank us for doing absolutely everything we can do to make sure that the Symphony can continue. It has been said that the world needs music more when it is in trouble than at any other time. We believe this, and we are doing are best to keep sharing it with the community.

This is all very gratifying, but it is not enough. Were it not for the support of the NDCA, (in addition to their Institutional Support,) and other federal programs, we would not have survived this season. It is still touch and go. We are pursuing any avenues for additional funding in order to survive.

We understand that the NDCA is pursuing funding from unspent money from the Coronavirus Relief Fund, through HB 1395. We support this effort 100%, so that we may continue to fulfill our mission and enrich the lives of our fellow North Dakotans.

Sincerely,

Mike Gardner Executive Director