

## **Support for SB 2018**

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**Red River Regional Council**

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Chairman Holmberg and Committee members, thank you for the opportunity to touch on the importance of SB2018. In Region 4 (northeastern North Dakota), we have been working diligently the past seven years in the areas of tourism/destination, workforce, manufacturing, and community development. These areas came to our forefront as key focal areas during strategic planning conducted in 2014.

First, I'd like to provide a brief report on activities in the Pembina Gorge, as this committee was instrumental to our ability to continue to develop outdoor recreational amenities. Though COVID prohibits Canadian visitors which have historically comprised most of the winter customers at Frost Fire, the Pembina Gorge Foundation opted to press forward to having a winter season this year. And, boy, are we glad we did. The mild winter and people aching to be outside, Frost Fire has been a bustling destination with more skiers than we'd imagined from down the valley and the entire state. This winter traffic has allowed us to showcase the Gorge and create a renewed awareness of these terrific amenities. COVID assistance has also been a lifeline for many of our small businesses.

In the past few years, we have enlisted support from the Department of Commerce and its partner programs in each of these areas. Both funding programs and expertise have been valuable to our efforts.

We have tapped funding from the Division of Community Services to address handicap accessibility at the Walla Theater, rehabilitate single family homes in Park River and Minto and launching a new project in Nelson County; greatly improve accessibility at Nelson County Health Systems in McVillage; build a new fire hall in Crystal; and address water supply emergencies in Lakota and Aneta. Without this funding, each of these projects would've struggled greatly to be completed.

We have also received funding from the Partners in Marketing and Planning programs. To increase awareness of the retention and expansion of our 20+ manufacturing firms, the marketing program provided matching funds to complete 10 social media videos, conduct strategic planning, and plan a couple substantial student awareness events. Our manufacturers need nearly 750 new employees to support growth and replace retiring personnel in the next 3-5 years. The planning program is currently being utilized to develop a six-county destination and brand development strategic plan that will guide our efforts for the next 5-10 years.

We regularly call upon the Small Business Development Center and Impact Dakota as key partners. Both organizations provide quality one-on-one consulting services to new and existing entrepreneurs in our region. We are also extremely appreciative of the ND Workforce Development Council and strongly support their recommendations. In partnership with North Valley Career and Technology Center, we have been developing career exposure and linkage opportunities for our existing businesses has already

had success and needs to be increased. ND Career Builders can continue to assist in leveling up these efforts.

Tourism has been vital to our growing momentum in the Rendezvous Region. With 1.2 million people within a two-hour drive, we believe tourism has vast development potential to enliven our rural main streets and further outdoor recreation and cultural assets. The expertise, data, marketing, and funding opportunities give us the confidence and boost that are resulting in increased visits to our region. The monthly industry chats that have been developed due to COVID have been outstanding. It is our hope that we can turn some of these visitors to residents. We don't want to be a "best kept secret" – to overcome this, we are ever-increasing our marketing and need Tourism's assistance.

I call for support in further programs that enhance our ability to develop our rural communities. Over the past couple of sessions, community enhancement programs through Tourism Infrastructure Grant Program and ND Parks and Recreation Department Community Grant Program were not funded. The Outdoor Heritage Fund has not funded numerous rural community recreation requests. Without matching grants, many of these projects simply do not proceed.

I write to provide specific examples of the value the Department of Commerce is regularly bringing to our region. We are extremely grateful for the leadership, staff, and resources.