

**Testimony of Megan Langley**  
**Before the House Political Subdivisions Committee**  
**Chairman Longmuir and Members of the Committee**  
**March 7, 2025**

Chairman Longmuir and members of the committee,

My name is Megan Langley, and I am here today to respectfully urge a “do pass” recommendation for SB 2097. I come before you not only as the Executive Director of Strengthen ND but as someone who has lived and worked in rural North Dakota my entire life. I grew up as a farm and ranch kid in Eddy County, and I now live outside the small town of Souris in Bottineau County, a community of just 50 people, where we are investing in redeveloping a long-vacant bank building into a community asset. My work has taken me into rural towns across this state, advocating for their needs and ensuring their voices are heard at the state and federal levels.

**About Strengthen ND**

Strengthen ND was founded in 2015 with a mission to empower rural communities through capacity building, grantmaking, and technical assistance. We have a statewide presence, having worked in over 150 communities since 2015. Currently, we have nearly 100 people deployed across our state in Strengthen ND staff positions and AmeriCorps positions. Our team has direct experience in setting up and managing endowment funds, operating community foundations, and overseeing private foundation, family trust, and corporate giving programs. We are the experts in identifying and assessing private, federal, and state-based return on investment in rural communities in North Dakota. **We know rural North Dakota.** We know its needs. We know its resources. We know its potential.

Importantly, we also recognize that nearly all communities in North Dakota—whether they are rural and frontier, mid-size rural communities between 1,000 and 10,000, or part of North Dakota’s big four cities—are under-resourced. We understand that additional resources are needed across the board to support the future of our state. However, we also know that we can make a significant and transformative difference in the future trajectories of communities of less than 1,000 through the establishment of the Rural Community Endowment Fund. We are in no way interested in pitting communities against each other based on their size, nor are we interested in pitting pieces of rural legislation against one another. **Our goal is simple: to ensure that North Dakota’s smallest communities have the dedicated resources they need to thrive.**

## **The History and Purpose of SB 2097**

SB 2097 is the product of over a decade's worth of conversations with rural community leaders across North Dakota. For over 15 years, I have worked in philanthropy and community development, and time and time again, I have received calls from rural communities in need of funding for projects—whether for infrastructure, economic development, housing, or community quality of life. **And time and time again, there was nowhere to refer them.** The resources they needed simply did not exist.

Out of this frustration, we began working closely with rural community members and elected officials to craft SB 2097. This effort began in earnest in September 2024, when we spent nearly three months collaborating with stakeholders to design a bill that would address the long-standing funding gap for rural communities.

SB 2097 is a strategic and fiscally responsible investment in the future of rural North Dakota. This bill establishes the Rural Community Endowment Fund, a permanent endowment that will provide sustainable grantmaking to communities with populations under 1,000.

Originally introduced with a \$50 million endowment fund and an additional \$5 million for immediate grantmaking, amendments have since reduced the fund to \$5 million and removed the immediate grantmaking component. While we continue to advocate for long-term commitments to rural North Dakota, the core principle remains: this is a permanent investment in our state's smallest communities, ensuring they have the resources needed to thrive for generations.

## **Why SB 2097 is Structured for Long-Term Success**

SB 2097 is designed as an endowment, meaning the principal will remain untouched, and only the earnings will be used for grantmaking. This structure ensures:

- **Perpetual Support** – Unlike one-time appropriations, this fund will continuously generate resources for rural North Dakota, year after year.
- **Fiscally Responsible Growth** – Assuming a 7% investment return, 1.5% investment fees, and a 4.5% distribution rate, the Rural Community Endowment Fund will have invested \$50 million into rural communities over 20 years while growing to over \$60 million, creating even greater impact over time.
- **No Growing Government** – Rather than adding to state bureaucracy, SB 2097 ensures funding is managed through a competitive Request for Proposal (RFP) process, selecting the best-qualified entity to administer grants. If performance falters, a new entity can be chosen, ensuring accountability and effectiveness.

## Meeting the Needs of Rural Communities

The need for SB 2097 is not hypothetical—it is urgent. Rural communities face substantial barriers, including:

- Limited access to flexible funding for critical infrastructure, housing, and workforce needs.
- Lack of match funding for state and federal grants, making it difficult for communities to secure outside resources.
- Capacity constraints, as most towns under 1,000 residents do not have a full-time JDA, EDA, or Chamber Director to lead local economic development efforts.

**Over 100 communities have expressed their support of this fund because they understand what's at stake.** From Sheyenne and Munich working to revitalize housing stock to Finley and Turtle Lake focusing on economic development, these towns know that investment today will shape their futures for decades to come.

Additionally, many communities have already outlined specific projects that would directly benefit from SB 2097 funding:

- **Arthur, Argusville, Erie, Gardner, Grandin, Hunter** – Small towns seeking to modernize community resources, innovatively partner to meet health and wellness needs, and strengthen their local economies.
- **Sheyenne, Fort Totten, Glenburn, Tuttle, Bowbells, Edgeley** – Communities focused on revitalizing housing stock and improving local food access and livability.
- **Underwood, Hoople, Robinson, New England, Turtle Lake** – Areas aiming to attract residents and businesses through strategic investments.
- **Rhame, Munich, Aneta, Wing, Towner, Donnybrook** – Towns working to address food deserts, outdated infrastructure, and economic diversification.

These communities represent just a fraction of those that stand to benefit. The demand for flexible, accessible funding is widespread, and **SB 2097 is the vehicle to meet it.**

## Conclusion

Rural North Dakota is the backbone of our state. SB 2097 is a commitment to its longevity. It is not a cost—it is an investment in the people and communities that define our state's identity. By creating a permanent, self-sustaining funding source, we are ensuring that these communities can continue to grow and prosper without needing continuous state appropriations.

I urge you to pass SB 2097 and give North Dakota's rural communities the tools they need to thrive.

Thank you for your time and consideration. I am happy to stand and answer any questions you may have.