



March 27, 2025

Senate State and Local Government

HB 1297

Senator Kristin Roers, Chair

For the record, my name is Kory Peterson. I am appearing before you today on behalf of the North Dakota League of Cities, in opposition to HB 1297. Prior to working with the North Dakota League of Cities, I was the Mayor of Horace for 8 years, from June 2016 to July 2024.

A task force was created by Fargo after witnessing situations where an elected official could be elected with 22% of the votes. The task force landed on using approval voting to help truly represent the citizen's votes when numerous candidates are on the ballot. There was a grass roots efforts by Fargo citizens to create and circulate a petition to have approval voting on the ballot for a vote. The petition committee follow all the procedures afforded them through Fargo's Home Rule charter. The petition was submitted and reviewed. It was determined the approval voting measure could be put to a vote. A campaign took place with both sides campaigning the pros and cons of switching to this method of voting. When the voters came to the polls to vote on approval voting, it passed with a 64% approval. This is exactly how the process is supposed to work, citizen engagement to effect change.

Any change can be met with resistance because of the fear of the unknown. 60% of the Fargo's voting public wanted this voting method. There have been 3 voting cycles since this measure was implemented. If the Fargo citizens who originally opposed approval voting have deep reservations with this voting schema after this amount of time, they should form a committee to work on a repel. They have access to go through the same procedure as any other group that wants to effect political changes. So far, there has been no committee formed to attempt to revoke approval voting in Fargo.

This is citizen democracy exercising their right to petition the government with a grievance and being heard. This promotes citizens to question policies and procedures; to point out areas where a political subdivision could be more effective.

We want to encourage citizen participation in the elections and do not want to disenfranchise them from participating in the process. North Dakota had low participation in this year's primary election of 20.1%. That means that roughly 80% of the state's population sat this one out. The general election participation rate was 62.5%, which was better but even in a hotly contested Presidential race, one third of the eligible electorate stayed home.

We need to continue to encourage participation in the political process in the state. I can remember times when I was Mayor of instances where citizens should have been at the public hearings to have a say even after the meeting was advertised on all social media platforms and the local newspaper. While I was disappointed during those times, there were others when the room was full and robust discussion was had. While some of the discussion got very enthusiastic, and I had to intervene sometimes, this is how public engagement in our government should occur and we want to continue to afford citizens the opportunity to stay involved in our local civics.

This bill has the appearance of the state interfering in local political subdivision affairs that should be a local control issue. Removing valid and legal options to perform local voting schemes is not something the state should be involved in.

The League would request this committee allow home rule authority to allow city residents to select alternative voting methods to select a candidate. Alternatively, the League would recommend an amendment to "grandfather" in Fargo's ordinances to recognize the Fargo elector's decision on this matter. Without this amendment, the League recommends a DO NOT PASS on HB 1297.

Thank you.

Kory Peterson