

House Government and Veterans Affairs Committee

Honorable Jim Kasper, Chairman

Senate Bill 2218

March 25, 2021

Testimony by Senator Brad Bekkedahl, District 1

Chairman Kasper and Committee,

Good morning. For the record, my name is Brad Bekkedahl, Senator from District 1, Williston. I am the prime sponsor for Senate Bill 2218, a bill for annual sessions of the North Dakota State Legislature. The bill is a response to several issues in our State. First, we have a biennial budget of over \$14 billion, and a process to prepare the Governor's budget recommendation that starts almost 3 years before the end of that operational biennium. We had the same procedure when our state budget was \$1.5 billion per biennium. Times have changed. Couple that with a state economy that is predominately tied to global commodities production and global market swings, and the need to react better to changing revenue environments becomes apparent. In my first two sessions here, I have seen both extremes. One session with record revenues and one with record reductions in spending. Second, if mistakes are made in legislation that require correction, we live with that mistake or suffer its consequences for as much as 20 months before the next biennium session opens. Third, meeting annually would enhance the authority of the legislative branch to make budget decisions and corrections, and allow the entire legislative body to react faster to across the board governor allotment reductions or prevent them altogether. And, if there were priorities that were left unfunded in a session and the revenue collected is significantly better than expected, we could act on funding those priorities. Conversely, if revenues were less than projected, the legislature could also act to correct that with budget revisions sooner. These are the major issues, but I am sure there are other issues that support the changes in this bill as well.

Operationally, nothing changes in how we do business now in the odd-numbered session years. We still have an organizational session in December after the general election, we still meet in January and produce a biennial budget. We still have bills introduced and hearings on policy. We still cannot exceed the 80-day constitutional limit for the biennium that the legislature can be in session. The emergency commission still operates, as does the Budget section. Legislative Management committee stays in place. What does change is the legislature is required by statute to meet annually, not to exceed the constitutional 80-day limit. Legislative Management is empowered to decide how long the even-year session will be, and when it will be scheduled. I envision a system where the even number year session is a budget review session (short session) with the full Legislative body present. And, anticipating the need for more days in the odd-numbered year session, the even-year session has a bill review committee, like our now delayed bills committee, that evaluates bills based on priority and critical importance for admission to the shorter session. There are no limits on the number of bills that may be submitted, and if they are not selected for that session, the bill sponsor is able to introduce them to the next odd-numbered year session, just as we do now. Also, unlike the bill introduced last session, the Interim committee system stays in place, and can meet during the entire interim, regardless of the standing committees coming back into the even year session. And, as you will see in the bill analysis sheet, pertinent committees such as Employee benefits programs committee remain too. The fiscal note shows an expense of \$265,000 for an anticipated 3-day session in the even numbered year.

Chairman Kasper, thanks to you and your committee for this hearing today and your consideration of my testimony. I encourage the committee to give consideration for a Do Pass recommendation. I am prepared to go through the bill section by section or can stand for questions if you prefer.