

Testimony Prepared for the
House Agriculture Committee
January 16, 2023
By: Jason Benson, Cass County Engineer



RE: Support for HB 1148 – Relating to county highways and bridges funding

Chairman Thomas and House Agriculture Committee members, thank you for the opportunity to provide testimony on HB 1148. I am Jason Benson, the Cass County Engineer, and I also serve on the legislative committee for the ND Association of County Engineers. I am here to support the bill as proposed.

In 2019 the North Dakota Legislature requested a study of the transportation infrastructure needs of all counties, townships, and tribes in the state. The Upper Great Plains Transportation Institute (UGPTI) at the North Dakota State University recently completed this 2022 Highway and Bridge Needs Study. In Cass County alone the estimated cost for county and township unpaved roads, paved highways, and bridges for 2022-2041 is \$514 million. This includes \$289 million for county gravel roads, \$157 million for county paved roads, and \$68 million for county bridges.

These significant long-term infrastructure needs are influenced by the agricultural industry across North Dakota, especially in Cass County. Higher crop yields require more trucks to haul across our county roads and bridges. Using 2017 data, ND produced 6.5 million tons of sugar beets, 7 million tons of hay, 1.6 million tons of silage, and 1.1 billion bushels of corn/soybeans/wheat (USDA 2017 data) for a total crop production that gets hauled from the field, to bins, and on to the elevator of 56 million tons of product. This requires over 1.4 million truckloads just to get the crop off the field. In addition, there are hundreds of thousands of other truckloads hauling the seed, fertilizer, equipment, and other agricultural items to keep our farms producing high quality crops.

This heavy agricultural traffic taxes the durability and safety of these local roads, which must be maintained to ensure continued safety as well as making sure goods get to market. These roads were designed and built for the trucks and farm equipment of the 1960's, they were not built in a way that reflects today's traffic and use. These needs are, of course, in addition to the needs the NDDOT faces for investment on the state highway system.

This level of agricultural production also increases the demand for grain and ag product transportation within the state to additional destinations, especially elevators, processors, ethanol plants, and rail loading facilities. Most often, these storage and processing facilities are located along county roads. Cass County has an ethanol plant located along a county highway. This plant requires 150-250 truckloads a day to haul in about 54 million bushels of corn annually. This plant produces 150 million gallons of ethanol and about 450,000 tons of dried distiller's grain each year. When the ethanol plant was constructed, the County took over the adjacent township road and reconstructed and paved the road at a cost of over \$2.5 million. Fortunately, at that time there was additional state funding to assist in paying for this road.

In 2022 there was a groundbreaking ceremony for a soybean processing plant along another Cass County highway. This \$400 million plant will process over 82 million bushels of soybeans annually, requiring between 300-400 truckloads per day, and even more during harvest season. Cass County is working with the township and North Dakota Soybean Processors (NDSP) to take over control of the township road and pave it. This is needed to have a high quality, concrete road to handle the significant

truck traffic. This project will cost nearly \$4 million with roughly \$1 million being paid for by NDSP, and \$3 million split between Cass County funding and NDDOT funding. This improved road infrastructure is needed to provide year-round access to this significant agriculture commodities processing facility.

Cass County and Counties across North Dakota need long term funding solutions to better plan and prioritize future road projects. Increases in state funding through this bill are critical to provide the efficient highway and bridge network to access agriculture rail and processing facilities. Without this additional funding, it will be difficult for counties to pay for the needed improvements of our highways and bridges to access these new facilities.

Chairman Thomas and House Agriculture Committee members, thank you for the opportunity to provide testimony and I urge you to support HB 1148.