

March 9, 2023

To: House Agriculture Committee
Re: Support of Senate Bill 2273
From: Beverly Voller, President
Hazelton Development Corporation

Chairman Thomas and members of the House Agriculture committee:

Hello, my name is Beverly Voller and I reside in rural Hazelton North Dakota. I am the President of the Hazelton Development Corporation. I am submitting testimony in support of Senate Bill 2273. Our small community of Hazelton with a population of less than 250 people has always worked together to sustain our community. Through a collaborative effort, we were able to construct a downtown business center which houses a manufacturing business, hair salon, coffee shop, and a grocery store.

Our grocery store was initially operated and managed by private individuals, but unfortunately, all of the owners could not make the grocery store a profitable business to pay the operating expenses and a livable wage for themselves and had to close the doors. Hazelton was without a grocery store and the nearest store is 16 miles to the south or 45 miles to the north. With a large population of elderly living in the community, winter travel, and high gas prices, a grocery store is a must in our community.

Many community members worked together and donated money to purchase enough inventory to open the doors. A Board of Directors was formed, and a manager hired to operate the grocery store. The grocery store has been struggling over the years but has been able to stay open to meet the needs of our community.

Through this proposed grant program in Senate Bill 2273, a formal structure could be developed that could assist smaller grocery stores in a variety of ways. By working with other

rural grocery stores and developing a plan to have affordable access to wholesale and locally produced food would be extremely beneficial. Store managers in smaller communities do not usually have any formal training on retail management and this grant program could perhaps provide that training for them. By “pooling of resources and purchases” collectively, and developing a distribution plan, smaller stores could receive better pricing and increase margins.

This issue is not unique to Hazelton, but to every small community in North Dakota. When a grocery store closes in a community, other businesses soon follow, and the small town becomes yet another ghost town on the map.

I strongly support our Legislators working with the Agriculture Committee and other pertinent partners to ensure that our rural communities can continue to thrive into the future.

Thank you.