

Testimony Prepared for the
House Transportation Committee

March 9, 2023

By: Jason Benson, Cass County Engineer



RE: Support SB 2362 Primary Seat Belt Use

Chairman Ruby and House Transportation Committee members, thank you for the opportunity to provide testimony on SB 2362. 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.

County Highway Departments across North Dakota have completed safety projects in conjunction with the 2014 NDDOT sponsored statewide Local Road Safety Plan (LRSP). The purpose of this plan was to identify safety emphasis areas, high priority safety strategies, at-risk locations, and develop safety investment options. One of the critical issues identified was the higher crash rate on rural paved roads. While gravel roads make up approximately 93% of North Dakota's 97,600 miles of the rural local road system, approximately half of the severe crashes are on the paved roads that make up only 7% of the rural system.

The LRSP therefore focused on the Cass County paved road network and a Risk Rating Criteria was developed for the paved roads based on: Density of Road Departure Crashes; Traffic Volume; Curve (Critical Radius) Density; Access Density; and Road Edge Risk Assessment. Cass County initially focused on safety strategies including rumble strips, pavement markings, pavement safety edges, and improved signing. The LRSP identified as the biggest safety recommendation action to improve streetlights, signage, pavement markings, and dynamic warning signs.

Since the 2014 LRSP, Cass County has applied for and received over \$1.75 million in Highway Safety Improvement Program (HSIP) funding and \$1.1 million in Safe Routes to Schools funding for critical intersection improvements and school zone safety projects. The HSIP funding, provided through the NDDOT, is over and above our normal allocation of federal highway and bridge funds.

Our focus on roadway safety has reduced the number of crashes on our county roads. From 2006 to 2012 we averaged 71 crashes per year on our roadways. From 2013 to 2020 we averaged 54 crashes per year, for a reduction of 23% since implementing these safety projects. It is encouraging to see the decrease in crashes these two periods before and after the implementation of these systemic safety improvements.

While we are making improvements on the safety of our roadways, we cannot spend and build our way out of serious crashes and fatalities. The reality is that for no cost, we can implement a law that will require primary seat belt use. For no cost, we will have a much greater impact than the millions of dollars we have spent and the millions more needed to keep reducing crashes. Chairman Ruby and committee members, I want to reiterate that NDACE supports the bill as written. Approving this change will encourage more seat belt use and prevent unnecessary serious injuries or fatalities on our county road networks.