



Chase Building
516 Cooper Avenue, Suite 101
Grafton, ND 58237
T: 701.352.3550
www.redriverrc.com

Testimony of Dawn Mandt in support of HB 1018 with an amendment
to the Senate Appropriations Committee
March 1, 2023

Senator Bekkedahl and members of the Appropriations Committee

My name is Dawn Mandt. I am the Executive Director of Red River Regional Council in Region 4 – serving Grand Forks, Nelson, Pembina, and Walsh Counties related to economic and community development. Our services are largely focused on supporting small towns and building regional coalitions with a disbursed rural population of 35,000 people spread over four counties (the size of West Fargo).

I am writing to seek your support for an amendment to HB 1018 which would add \$8 million to support increased planning and capacity at the eight regional councils (\$1 million per region per biennium).

Over the past two years, our office conducted 130 one-on-one business interviews to listen, learn and develop a clear understanding of both their needs and opportunities. **We uncovered a need for a workforce in the rural areas of our region that amounts to 1,500 new employees over the next five years.**

We also revealed that 90% of our companies have projected and planned growth.

Workforce, childcare, and housing are our key barriers to enabling this growth. We have been developing regional collaborative efforts on each of these funds – however, lack adequate resources to fund long-term capacity to make a meaningful difference.

Without adequately tending to the specific growth needs and creating communities where people want to and CAN live, we are beginning to lose ground.

Companies have begun to relocate or expand elsewhere.

Motor Coach Industries, a major commercial coach manufacturer, announced the relocation of its Pembina plant to Crookston, MN, in 2022. This will leave 200 employees and a 209,000 sq ft manufacturing facility. This company has been in Pembina since 1963.

Region 4 is positioned for a rural renaissance. According to the Pew Foundation, twice as many Americans prefer living in a small town rather than a large city. We have people coming home and raising their young families in our small towns. They are bringing renewed energy, spirit, and investment – many of them opening new businesses and enhancing real estate.

We've been making great strides in our region with future-focused investments:

- We are building a \$2 million regional business and food incubator on main street Grafton this year in partnership with several local public and private partners.
- North Valley Career and Technology Center is building a 10,000 sq ft expansion in Grafton as well as expansions and enhancements in Park River, Minto, and a new satellite location in Cavalier serving the northern tier of our region along the Canadian border where we have several healthcare, education, and manufacturing employers.
- We've built a regional coalition of private and public partners around workforce attraction with the goal to reach the state's homepage of the Find the Good Life initiative alongside our regional marketing and attraction efforts. The Find the Good Life initiative lacks rural areas to point to due to the lack of regional and locally driven strategies. Systemically, this should be a red flag statewide. Our effort has been enabled only for the short term (currently through June 30, 2023) with a state grant matched by three county job development authorities while our urban centers across the state have had similar campaigns for nearly a decade.
- We are also ready to implement a Destination Red River Action Plan we developed over the past two years with a nationally renowned destination development expert, Roger Brooks, to enhance our communities and destinations for visitors and residents alike. This regional

plan (built after spending a month secret shopping all 42 communities in our region) calls for six full-time staff and a marketing budget. Today, we have only one part-time project manager leading this effort.

Help us amplify and multiply these efforts to grow our corner of the state – the opportunity is now – let’s not miss it.

We are experts in project development and finding funding to implement. We have vast networks of key partners. We have a 95% success rate in securing the funds we seek. Attached to this testimony is a vision of our evolving organization and the roles that we serve in northeastern North Dakota. We have inched towards implementing this vision and yet lack adequate resources to solidify it – this would be the use of the state’s funding in Region 4.

Please support this amendment to HB 1018.

Red River Development Group

The Red River Regional Council is currently in a transformative state. Evolving to strongly work to meet the needs of the region through collaborative networked leadership models. This will result in 2-3 entities branded as a collaboration in 2023.

