



February 9, 2023

To: Senate Appropriations Committee

Re: Support of Senate Bill 2273

From: Jenna Gullickson, Owner/Operator, Hoople Grocery

Chairman Bekkedahl and members of the Senate Appropriations Committee, my name is Jenna Gullickson and I am the owner of Hoople Grocery and the Secretary/Treasurer of the Rural Access Distribution Cooperative. I am here today to give testimony and ask for your support of Senate Bill 2273.

I grew up in Park River, my husband is from Hoople, and we are now raising our two boys in Hoople. We are a community of approximately 250 people, which includes a lot of young families, such as mine. The previous owners of the grocery store were set to retire in 2015 so my husband and I decided to buy the store and keep it open for our community. Owning your own store in rural areas is a commitment, but one my husband and I decided to gladly take on. When approached by Lori Capouch, with the NDAREC, about this idea, I jumped at the chance. If you have the option to work together to lower costs and bring in a larger selection of product, why not? As with any pilot program, there are always a few hurdles. For me, I had to get used to a new ordering system through UNFI and getting our point-of-sale system set up. I only employ 4 part-time high school students and 1 part-time adult.

We have had many positive remarks since becoming part of the Rural Access Distribution Co-op. Our patrons have noticed the increase in variety of products, lower prices, and fresher produce. Our store sales have increased 23% over the past year since ordering through the co-op. We are looking to add more coolers and freezers to our store to accommodate for the increase in products and sales. This would not have been possible without the funds to develop our co-op, giving us the ability to purchase from a larger grocery store distributor in UNFI and

purchase a truck to safely distribute these items to our location. I have had suppliers drop our store so it has been nice to be able to get that product back in our store through the co-op as well.

Last year when the food and milk supplier dropped the Valley-Edinburg school system, the superintendent reached out to our cooperative. With some teamwork, we were able to step in fulfill their grocery and milk needs. The preschool through 2<sup>nd</sup> grade building is located in Hoople, along with the extended school program for the Valley-Edinburg school system. The school also houses Lil' Spuds Childcare, all of whom I receive and fulfill orders for now. I believe it is huge for our community to be able to continue having a grocery store and for our community members to be able to stop in after work and provide a whole meal for their families. I feel it is vital we keep our store open to provide for our community and attract more families to our area. With the positives I have highlighted today and with community support, I feel our store is now more sustainable for years to come. We are changing the outlook of our store from being a convenience store with a few grocery items, to a grocery store with some convenience store items.

Through hard work and collaboration, this dream has become reality for our communities, with continued work ahead of us. Please support Senate Bill 2273 so other rural areas in ND can experience the same success. Thank you!