



TESTIMONY IN SUPPORT OF HOUSE BILL 1524

Chairman Headland and Members of the Committee...

Thank you for the opportunity to speak today in support of House Bill 1524.

I am Brent Ekstrom, Executive Director of the Lewis & Clark Regional Development Council (RDC). We are based in Mandan and serve Burleigh, Emmons, Grant, Kidder, McLean, Mercer, Morton, Oliver, Sheridan, and Sioux counties.

I'd like to take a few minutes to specifically address how HB 1524 will help address one of North Dakota's most pressing needs: affordable housing.

This is a challenge I am deeply involved in as affordable housing is a primary focus of my work.

I wear many hats in tackling this challenge as an RDC director, but also as the executive director of CommunityWorks North Dakota and Lewis & Clark Property Management, as well as a member of the Federal Home Loan Bank of Des Moines' Affordable Housing Advisory Council. In 2022, I served as a member of the ND Rural Housing Task Force which studied why, despite demand, very little new home construction was happening in rural areas. Last summer, at the invitation of Governor Burgum, I also served on the Statewide Housing Initiative Advisory Committee.

So, affordable housing is an issue that is close to my heart. And that is why I support House Bill 1524.

RDCs Currently Lack Capacity

While Lewis & Clark RDC has been very successful at securing funding for our own projects – leveraging grants, loans, and investments to the benefit of all involved – we, along with all other RDCs, lack the capacity to assist communities in applying for grants to help them expand housing opportunities.

Too often, communities reach out to RDCs asking if we are aware of any affordable housing grants or funding opportunities. While we certainly tell them what's available, we cannot currently help them navigate the very complex application process.

Three Bad Options

This gap in capacity leaves too many communities – almost all of them rural – with three not-so-ideal options when it comes to seeking affordable housing funding:

- **Shift a Staff Member:** First, city governments can pull someone from their already limited staff to work on the grant application process.
- **Hire Expensive Out-of-State Consultants:** Second, they can attempt to find the money to hire an expensive, often out-of-state, consultant who is not familiar with them or North Dakota.
- **Give Up:** Or, thirdly, they simply don't apply at all.

Too often, communities select option three – and I can't blame them. Grant applications are highly technical, cumbersome, and time-consuming. The learning curve is steep, and without dedicated resources, it's a daunting process.

HB 1524 is Community-Focused

House Bill 1524 presents a real opportunity to address this capacity gap. The bill will help RDCs serve as true partners to our communities by increasing our ability to:

- 1) Research funding opportunities,
- 2) Assist in filling out applications, and
- 3) Most importantly, helping communities demonstrate a clear Return on Investment for their project.

As I see it, this bill is not just an investment in RDCs – it's an investment in the future of our communities.

House Bill 1524 provides RDCs with additional resources to help local governments apply for grants, collaborate effectively, and support communities in tackling their affordable housing needs.

We need many arrows in the quiver to successfully address North Dakota's affordable housing challenge.

Based on my experience and perspective, House Bill 1524 finally gives RDCs an arrow that has long been needed to help communities hit the target in expanding affordable housing opportunities throughout North Dakota.

Thank you for your time, consideration, and support of North Dakota's regional development councils.