

Testimony of Dawn Mandt in support of HB 1524
To the House Finance and Taxation Committee
Tuesday, February 4, 2025

Chairman Headland, Vice Chairman Hagert, and Committee Members,

Hi, my name is Dawn Mandt, and I'm the Executive Director of the Red River Regional Council in Grafton. Our team serves four counties in the northeast corner of North Dakota. I have been a rural developer in North Dakota since I was a junior at Jamestown College in 1992 – this is my 33rd year.



In our region, about 92,000 people call this area home, **with around 35,000 of them living in small towns and on farms.** That's about the same number of people as the city of West Fargo—just spread out across 40 communities in four counties. And these communities aren't going anywhere because many families have deep roots here, especially in farming, one of North Dakota's biggest industries. **People in our area travel a lot within an hour's drive for work and daily life,** so we've built strong connections and partnerships across the region. And these people are our friends and neighbors. Forty percent of North Dakotans live in small towns with under 5,000 people.

Grand Forks is our closest big city and has been growing momentum ever since the 1997 flood. The surrounding areas support this success. In fact, more than half of the sales tax collected in Grand Forks comes from visitors and commuting patterns show an interdependence between small towns and larger cities such as in Region 4.

Over the past 15 years, North Dakota has gone through a major transformation. It's been exciting to watch and we'd like to become a stronger part of it! Back in 1987, some researchers wrote about an idea called the **Buffalo Commons**, suggesting large parts of the Great Plains should return to the wild. People in North Dakota were shocked. **Instead of giving up, we took action.** The state launched the Growing North Dakota initiative that included a statewide vision and led to programs like the PACE program that still support our businesses and communities today.

Most of the growth in North Dakota the past 15 years has been focused on a few areas—mainly the oil-rich counties and bigger cities. Right now, 75% of the state's workforce is in just ten counties, and most of the population growth in the last decade happened in just three: Cass, Burleigh, and Williams. The state has invested billions of dollars into these areas, and even programs meant to support statewide growth have mostly benefited those larger regions. Forty percent (40% or approx. 318,000 people) of North Dakotans live in small towns with under 5,000 people.

Some state agencies, like the Housing Finance Agency, have made efforts to support small towns as we've shared how program design disabled small towns from accessing investment.

For example, HFA created a set aside for rural housing. To put this into perspective, a small 8-unit housing project in Cavalier is just as meaningful as building 800 units in Fargo. However, there's still a huge gap—our region alone needs 4,800 new housing units, and we estimated two years ago that we needed 1,500 new workers. And in 2024, we had nearly 1,000 H2A agricultural workers come from other parts of the world and joined our communities.

At the Red River Regional Council, **we work hard to support small towns and regional partnerships with very limited resources.** Our local leaders are volunteers juggling multiple responsibilities to keep their communities running. **We develop long-term plans with their help, but without proper funding, we often struggle to move forward.**

We recently created a Destination Development Plan, with input from over 600 people, to attract visitors and new residents. We also launched a workforce initiative called Real. Good. to help fill job openings. We've been scrapping funds together to employ a Housing Developer for the past two years. **We piece funding together from any possible source – often funding long-term ideals with short-term grants which is not sustainable.**

We have created regional collaborations, we've engaged and worked to empower our people, and we have been creating regional momentum. **We'd welcome the state's partnership in many of these efforts.**

We have an opportunity to create real, lasting change for our small towns. That's why I'm asking you to support **HB 1524**—so we can invest in our communities, work together, and build a stronger future for all of North Dakota.

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