



Testimony of Briselda Hernandez Herrera in support of HB 1524
To the House Finance and Taxation Committee
Tuesday, February 4, 2025

Chairman Headland and Members of the Committee,

My name is Briselda Hernandez Herrera, and I am the Executive Director of Souris Basin Planning Council (SBPC). SBPC serves a seven-county region comprised of Bottineau, Burke, McHenry, Mountrail, Pierce, Renville, and Ward counties. I have had the privilege of working with communities, leaders, and businesses for over 10 years. I have seen firsthand the power of people and communities working together to improve quality of life and create opportunities for economic growth. On the other hand, many of the communities that I have worked with have struggled to advance community projects due to limited funding and the reality that most community leaders are stretched with numerous volunteer roles. Fewer than half of North Dakota's counties have local economic development organizations, and only 19 small towns have part- or full-time development staff. When there are so many needs to be addressed—whether it is housing, food deserts, and childcare—it can be hard for communities to lead this work alone.

I come before you today in support of HB 1524. HB 1524 will provide the much-needed people power to get things done in a resourceful and strategic manner. It will help build staff-capacity for regional councils who are positioned to advance economic and community development.

Why Regional Councils?

Formed by state law (NDCC 54-40.1), North Dakota's eight regional councils are a boots-on-the-ground resource that provide the support to advance community projects. Regional councils are deeply embedded in the community offering technical assistance, expertise, and a structure for collaboration. As a public servant, I understand the importance of ensuring that we are good stewards of public dollars. I believe regional councils have a proven track record of maximizing every dollar and being transparent.

- **Transparency and Accountability:** Regional councils operate under strict governance which includes annual reporting and audits. Their boards are made up of elected city officials and county commissioners (majority) and regional stakeholders who help ensure funds are being used properly.
- **Planning:** Every five years, regional councils develop a Comprehensive Economic Development Strategy (CEDS), a community-driven plan for smart and strategic economic and community development. The CEDS aligns priorities and efforts to increase impact. It helps ensure that resources are used efficiently and effectively.
- **Partnerships and Statewide Networks:** Regional councils are well-connected and rely on strategic partnerships to tackle needs. They have a network of long-term, trusted relationships with local and state leadership as made evident in the testimonies submitted. Their planning



activities and work engage a diverse range of stakeholders within the private, public, and nonprofit sectors. Programs and services provided by regional councils are designed to complement not duplicate efforts.

- Statewide Impact:** Regional councils offer a variety of programs and services including project development and implementation. Their impact can be seen and felt statewide. The table below summarizes their impact in the last five years. Projects include housing, infrastructure, business development, community betterment, and disaster mitigation and recovery.

2019-2023 Impact	
Metric	Total
Funding applications assisted	1,410
Total funding secured with Regional Council assistance	\$364,751,823
Additional funds leveraged	\$531,557,176
Total investment in North Dakota	\$896,308,998
Jobs created or retained	5,122
Community & economic development plans created	55
Public forums, meetings, and planning sessions	411

Why Funding Now?

There is a shared consensus that a regional approach to economic and community development is needed to maximize impact, and regional councils are well positioned to lead this work. Unfortunately, regional councils are faced with the same challenges experienced by our communities— limited staff-capacity. While regional councils have been successful in generating tremendous impact without state funding, additional support is needed for regions to be better able to take advantage of programming and funding opportunities and implement long-term solutions. The \$8 million allocation is based on a deep-dive assessment of capacity needs that will help address regional priorities such as grant writing and administration, business development, workforce development, and housing. Imagine what more can be accomplished at full capacity! This is why I am asking you to support **HB 1524**. Thank you for your time and consideration.

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