



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 1548

To the House Human Services Committee

Tuesday, January 28, 2025

Rep. Ruby and members of the Human Services Committee. My name is Dawn Mandt and I am a Grafton resident and executive director of the Red River Regional Council. The regional council is an economic and community development organization serving the four counties of Region 4 in northeast North Dakota for the past fifty years.

In the mid-1990s, I staffed an effort for five years to redevelop unused or under-utilized areas of the Life Skills and Transition Center (LSTC). This was following the migration of care for developmentally disabled to community-based settings and a continual decline of the people residing on the campus in Grafton. This effort included a Steering Committee which was co-chaired by Lt. Governor Rosemarie Myrdal and Sen. Harvey Tallackson. The ND Department of Commerce funded a study to determine alternate uses. **This effort led to the redevelopment of two grand historic properties that were built in the early 1900s and had been vacant for twenty years.** We secured 12 sources of cash and Metro Plains Development became our developer – which led to the development of 49 apartments that have enjoyed full occupancy for nearly 30 years.

Today, we have a similar opportunity.

And today, we can dream even bigger.

Just a few years ago, we conducted 130 business interviews and revealed a great need for more people in our region. At that time, we estimated the need for 1,500 new employees in our region, excluding Grand Forks. We have a strong manufacturing sector with more than 25 manufacturing companies in Walsh and Pembina Counties alone with more than 1,200 employees and 90% of them have growth plans and need to replace retiring staff. Our farmers are now also making great use of the H2A visa program and in 2024, we had nearly 1,000 temporary farm workers in our region. These numbers are not captured in the Census data.

Two years ago, we resurrected the nonprofit housing development organization we first established to support that 1990s effort. We are working to address the complex issues related to rural housing to enable our people attraction efforts.

Our 2024 regional housing study forecasted the need for 4,800 housing units in our rural region based on job forecasts.

We need quality of life assets in our small towns. **Our regional, rural population is 35,000 people – the size of West Fargo.** This population is spread throughout 42 communities. Our people live, work and play within approximately an hour radius as many of our people have a connection to the land. They will remain disbursed. **We are also building a regional mindset and building collaborative relationships between communities.**

Examples of this include our regional people attraction initiative entitled Real. Good. Northeast ND and the partnerships we have established with Grand Forks with a shared regional workforce plan that we are just now completing. We also joined two communities in 2024 and signed a contract to build four new single-family homes. Two are complete in Lakota and are sold. Two more are under construction in Larimore. And a couple weeks ago, Park River started a similar project.

We have very positive, forward-looking people in our small towns. Hoople cut the ribbon on a new community center on New Years Eve, people in Michigan have started buying and flipping houses, Destination Fordville is a local group making continuous community improvements, and Cavalier's main street is looking brand new due to storefront improvement incentives.

This proposed wellness facility would be another exemplary project of collaboration. In a recent public survey, we heard from hundreds of people in our region – 90% of them want community growth and vibrancy. Today, you've heard from several key collaborative partners from the northeast region – with excitement on coming together to enable this bold vision. **Facilities such as this are differentiators that keep our people healthy, create a sense of community, and welcome newcomers. And – serve the State's vision of becoming the healthiest state in the country.**

We know we can achieve even more when we come together, when we act as one with a shared vision and purpose.

In addition to the \$10 million request for capital improvements with the wellness facility, I ask you to consider an additional \$800,000.

We estimate \$500,000 is needed to:

- **Complete a Facility Condition Assessment** to identify existing buildings for reuse and/or demolition and provide a baseline cost of capital renewal needs
- **Complete a preliminary master plan** to utilize the assessment data to develop a comprehensive master plan and identify synergies for reuse
- **These two elements would be completed within 12 months.**

We would use \$300,000 to **enable staff leadership as a Project Manager** – the role I played in the 1990s for five years. This approach would make it possible for community stakeholders to come together with the state of North Dakota to develop an intentional master plan that both preserves the ongoing and important mission of the Life Skills and Transition Center while also opening the door to new ideas and new beginnings for the Grafton community and the whole northeast region.

Dawn Mandt, Executive Director

dawn@redriverrc.com

701-520-0487

