

Testimony in Support of House Bill No. 1438

Presented by Emily Beck, Executive Director, Fargo Theatre

Good afternoon, Chairman Warry, members of the committee, my name is Emily Beck. I'm a lifelong North Dakota resident and for the last 13 years, I've had the pleasure of serving as Executive Director of the Fargo Theatre.

Nestled in the heart of downtown Fargo, the Fargo Theatre has been lighting up Broadway and igniting imaginations for nearly 99 years. This historic landmark is more than just a local icon; it is a thriving hub of arts and entertainment and a cornerstone of our city's cultural and economic vitality. Every year, the Fargo Theatre welcomes approximately 80,000 guests through its doors, drawing visitors from across North Dakota and beyond.

The Fargo Theatre is a critical economic driver for downtown Fargo. Studies show that for every dollar spent on an arts ticket, an additional \$3-\$4 is spent in the surrounding community—on dining, shopping, parking, and lodging. With an estimated economic impact of over \$5 million annually, the Fargo Theatre directly contributes to the vibrancy and growth of Fargo's downtown businesses, from locally owned restaurants to boutique retailers.

When the Theatre first opened in 1926 as a silent cinema and Vaudeville house, it quickly became a gathering place where residents could connect, celebrate, and create memories. Nearly a century later, the Fargo Theatre has maintained this legacy while expanding its role to meet the diverse needs of our modern community.

Incorporated as a nonprofit in 1983, the Fargo Theatre underwent a major renovation in 1998, restoring its iconic art deco architecture and fixtures. In 2009, we added a second auditorium, a strategic investment that increased programming opportunities and allowed us to reach even more audiences. Today, the Fargo Theatre operates as both a cinema and a live event venue, offering a vibrant mix of independent films, live performances, and community events.

Our slate of programming reflects the diversity of our community. As the only art house cinema in the region, we specialize in independent, international, and critically acclaimed films. We are also proud to produce the annual Fargo Film Festival, now in its 25th year, which is the largest media arts festival in the Dakotas and a significant tourism driver.

As a live event venue, we host a wide variety of performances, including productions by local arts organizations like the Fargo-Moorhead Symphony Orchestra and the F-M Ballet. Our longstanding partnership with Jade Presents has brought professional touring musicians, comedians, and dance companies to the Fargo Theatre stage, drawing sell-out crowds and energizing our community.

But our reach goes beyond entertainment. The Fargo Theatre is a symbol of Fargo's identity and a catalyst for connection. Every year, we welcome thousands of students for field trips, where history comes alive on the big screen. Our marquee, named the "most photographed location in Fargo" by Forum Communications, serves as a beacon for our city, appearing in tourism commercials, celebrity selfies, and even ESPN Game Day broadcasts.

In celebration of the Fargo Theatre's upcoming centennial, we are conducting a capital campaign to fund projects that are critical to the organization's ability to serve the community. These projects fit into two primary areas of focus: preservation of the historic facility and production technology improvements. Specific expenses include large-scale HVAC and plumbing projects, seating replacement, and upgrading the Theatre's 30-year-old audio, lighting, staging infrastructure.

The Fargo Theatre is more than a venue—it's a vital part of our community's cultural and economic ecosystem. The opportunity presented by House Bill No. 1438 will ensure that this historic landmark can continue to evolve and thrive as we approach our centennial. The one-time matching grant proposed in this bill is a transformative investment that will multiply private contributions, amplifying the impact of every dollar raised. This funding will not only preserve an important piece of North Dakota's history but also secure the Theatre's future as a driver of economic growth, tourism, and community engagement.

With your support, we can honor the Fargo Theatre's legacy while positioning it for another century of service to the people of North Dakota. Thank you for considering this critical investment in one of our state's most beloved cultural assets.