

Lawmakers' discussion around SB 2390 (Rural Catalyst) must include discussion of SB 2097 (Rural Endowment). I think it is helpful to speak of both bills here in explaining my opposition to SB 2390.

Does the ND legislature still care about rural folks? SB 2097 vs SB 2390

Why do our Class B graduates keep moving to the cities? Housing crisis, lack of childcare, and outdated infrastructure among other things. Two bills are being considered. SB 2097 provides a solution: a Rural Endowment Fund where interest would provide competitive grants for housing, childcare, infrastructure repairs, and more in towns with under 1000 residents. The resident threshold is key because previous state grants have forced volunteer-led communities to compete against cities with professional grant writers. The reality has been small towns that work to hold onto their schools like Maddock, Oberon, Fessenden, Munich, and Napoleon competing against thriving college towns like Wahpeton or Devils Lake! (note all these communities are under 8500)

In contrast, SB 2390 looks good on the surface, but has major issues that rural folks understand. First, it raises the population criteria to include cities up to 8,500 people. Secondly, **ongoing projects will be prioritized, and matching funds will be required**. So, if your small community didn't have the money to start a project in the first place, then tough luck! Defending the matching requirement, supporters of SB 2390 want our community volunteers to "prove they have skin in the game". Really? We live out here, what more do we have to prove? Simply put, SB 2390 is not a good bill. It isn't an endowment, so the money would dry up in two years, creating uncertainty for potential grantees and a future strain on taxpayers.

Rural folks keep our communities going, while driving the ag and energy industries, and sending our best and brightest to fuel the workforce in the cities. All we ask is for our share in the wealth that we helped generate for our State. The legislature needs to increase the investment in SB 2097 and pass it as originally written.

SB 2390 is not the right answer for our truly small and rural towns. You will notice that larger cities are the ones that support SB 2390 in testimony, and yes it may be good for them! But the fact is they have paid community development people, and an exponentially larger tax base to support projects. They can even pay mileage for people to come testify in person. There must be a way for you to see that our smaller towns need SB 2097. As a community volunteer, I know how urgent the needs in our smallest communities are. I also know how much opportunity there is to make meaningful changes for relatively little investment per community. My town has demonstrated this! If you pass SB 2390, and also shelve or severely underfund SB 2097, it will prove that ND has abandoned our smallest communities and can't claim to have rural values anymore.

Kill SB 2390. Pass SB 2097 unamended.

Submitted by Joanna Larson, Sheyenne ND, 3/12/2025