



January 6, 2025

Senate Appropriations Committee
North Dakota Legislative Assembly
600 East Boulevard Avenue
Bismarck, ND 58505

Subject: Support for Senate Bill 2018 – Increasing North Dakota’s Tourism Budget

Dear Members of the Senate Appropriations Committee,

I am writing to express my strong support for Senate Bill 2018, which seeks to increase North Dakota’s tourism budget. As the founder and majority owner of the Bismarck Larks, Minot Hot Tots, and Minot Honeybees and organizer of numerous North Dakota community events through Funatix Events, I have seen firsthand how tourism and community-driven experiences strengthen local economies, enhance quality of life, and attract visitors. Serving on the boards of the Theodore Roosevelt Medora Foundation and the Mandan Progress Organization has further reinforced my belief that tourism is a critical driver of workforce recruitment, retention, and economic growth.

If workforce recruitment and retention is North Dakota’s top priority, I firmly believe we must increase investment in tourism and quality of life initiatives.

Attracting talent is not solely about job creation – it’s about fostering vibrant communities that offer a sense of belonging and opportunity. Tourism introduces potential residents to North Dakota’s culture, events, and people, providing a firsthand look at what makes our state special. When we invest in community events, public spaces, and attractions, we not only draw visitors but encourage them to stay, work, and build their futures here.

North Dakota’s tourism budget lags significantly behind neighboring states like South Dakota, Montana, Wyoming and Minnesota (more than four times). These states have long recognized the direct connection between tourism promotion, economic growth, and workforce attraction. If we want to remain competitive, we must amplify our investment to showcase the authentic experiences and communities that define North Dakota.

Tourism isn’t just about drawing visitors – it’s about positioning North Dakota as a great place to live. Many individuals first experience our state through local events, landmarks, and community festivals. If workforce development is our focus, tourism must lead the charge in highlighting the lifestyle and values that make North Dakota unique.

When my wife and I moved to North Dakota eight years ago we were so excited to start our company but wondered, “What is there to do? Will we enjoy living here?” Did you know recent research showed only

16% of Americans are familiar with what North Dakota offers? What my wife and I found though was something larger cities often lack – personal, community-driven experiences where events aren't just attended but actively participated in. North Dakota communities excel at creating meaningful, inclusive events that foster connection, community pride, and highlight one of our greatest strengths – North Dakota's hospitality. For newcomers, North Dakota becomes more than just a place to work – it becomes a place to belong.

Today's workforce seeks more than just a paycheck—they desire a vibrant, fulfilling lifestyle.

Events like the Norsk Høstfest in Minot, Mandan Rodeo, ND Country Fest in New Salem, Fargo & Bismarck Marathons, ArtFest in Grand Forks, Chokecherry Festival in Watford City, and many others are vital to North Dakota's identity.

However, rising costs of construction, marketing, and operations make it increasingly difficult for organizers to expand, upgrade, or launch new attractions. The financial strain often limits their ability to broaden their reach and grow attendance. By increasing the tourism budget and expanding marketing grants and other strategic support programs, events like the Bismarck Marathon and Mandan Rodeo could access funding to attract more out-of-state visitors while strengthening their local impact.

The Destination Development Fund is a prime example of how strategic investment can drive growth. When North Dakota allocated \$25 million in matching grants for new attractions, it generated \$150 million in private investment interest. This overwhelming response highlights the demand for funding and the readiness of organizations to pursue transformative projects. Expanding grant programs will unlock new initiatives that create jobs, drive visitation, and enhance communities statewide.

Supporting Senate Bill 2018 is not just an investment in tourism – it's an investment in North Dakota's workforce, economy, and future. By expanding our tourism infrastructure and supporting organizations that create these experiences, we will attract new visitors, retain residents, and cultivate the workforce needed to sustain and grow our economy.

Thank you for your leadership and dedication to North Dakota's growth. I appreciate your consideration of this important initiative and welcome the opportunity to discuss it further.

Sincerely,

John Bollinger



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