

**Testimony in Support of Senate Bill 2018**  
**Senate Appropriations Committee – Government Operations Division**  
**Chairman Terry Wanzek**

*Testimony of Jessica Ackerman – Aksal Group, Minot, ND*

*Date: January 15, 2025*

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Good afternoon, Chairman Wanzek and members of the committee.

Thank you for the opportunity to share my experience as a sub-recipient of a Destination Development Grant and to highlight its impact on communities like Minot and others across North Dakota.

My name is Jessica Ackerman, and I represent Aksal Group, a small family-owned property redevelopment business in downtown Minot. Aksal Group was one of four Minot businesses that took a collaborative approach on a joint application organized under our community's Convention and Visitors Bureau – Visit Minot – to maximize the impact for our community. Visit Minot was the recipient of a nearly \$1 million grant to enhance the tourism draw in downtown Minot.

Through Visit Minot, Aksal Group was granted approximately \$790,000 toward our \$1.8 million Citizens Alley project – a vibrant community plaza in the heart of downtown, a place to host farmers markets, live performances, art installations, outdoor recreation, and seasonal programming such as ice skating. In addition to the \$1 million in private funds being used to construct Citizens Alley, \$3 million of private investment is being undertaken in adjoining properties, representing a nearly \$5 million reinvestment into our city's core.

The grant didn't just fund a project – it is accelerating private philanthropy and private investment. It is fueling collaboration across private businesses, nonprofits, and public entities. It is driving innovation and long-term value for our community. For small family developers like us, this grant pushes us to look deeper into our own resources and find creative ways to stretch every dollar, ensuring that the impact of state funding is amplified.

Projects like Citizens Alley are much more than infrastructure; they are about people. Public spaces and quality of life initiatives are critical for fostering a sense of belonging, social cohesion, and civic engagement. These investments create environments that attract and retain visitors to our communities.

Destination Development Grants are not simply expenditures—they are investments that strengthen the North Dakota economy and North Dakota communities. High-quality public spaces and unique small businesses make our state more attractive to visitors, guests, and residents.

In addition to the economic benefits tied to hosting visitors to our State, these quality-of-life initiatives aid in our efforts to develop workforce by creating the attractive communities that are so important in recruiting people to our state and keeping them here.

Communities often lack the resources to tackle transformative projects independently. Additionally, private investors may not have the resources or the business to support the development of amenities that attract visitors and residents alike. This program has unlocked the potential that exists in the collaborative space between public and private, for-profit and non-profit. When all of these stakeholders are working together to achieve a common goal of making our state more attractive to visitors and residents, the results are nothing short of exceptional.

On behalf of Aksal Group, the community of Minot, and Destination Development Grant recipients statewide, thank you for supporting this program in the past, and we ask for your support in the budget that is in front of you today. It's a privilege to be part of this effort. This grant has helped us dream bigger to create destinations that inspire pride and connection with our great state. Your investment will benefit generations to come.

Thank you.