

Chairman Luick and Members of the Senate Agriculture and Veterans Affairs Committee,

My name is Cody Hilliard, and I am from Souris, North Dakota, a small town in Bottineau County. I am here today to express my strong support for Senate Bill 2097, which proposes the creation of the Rural Community Endowment Fund.

I have spent my entire life in rural North Dakota, working in agriculture and now in the oil and gas industry. These experiences have given me a deep appreciation for the unique challenges and opportunities that rural communities face. In addition to my professional background, I am a youth wrestling coach in rural Bottineau County, where I see firsthand the critical role that community resources and investments play in shaping the lives of young people and their families.

Rural communities are the backbone of North Dakota's economy, supporting vital industries like agriculture and energy. However, many of these communities are struggling to maintain the infrastructure and services necessary for families and businesses to thrive. As someone who has worked in agriculture and oil and gas, I know how crucial it is to have reliable infrastructure—whether it's roads to transport crops and equipment or utilities to support industrial operations. These basic needs cannot be met without sustainable funding solutions.

SB 2097 is a solution to these challenges. By creating a \$50 million endowment fund, the state can provide rural communities with the flexible, reliable funding they need to address critical issues like housing, workforce development, and infrastructure upgrades. This fund would empower local leaders to make decisions that best serve their communities, ensuring resources are used effectively and with maximum impact.

As a youth wrestling coach, I see every day how important it is to invest in the next generation. Sports programs like ours are often supported by small-town schools and community facilities, both of which depend on local resources to operate. Unfortunately, many rural communities lack the funding to maintain or improve these essential spaces. SB 2097 would allow communities to invest in projects that directly benefit young people and their families, whether it's upgrading a school gymnasium, building safe housing for families, or creating recreational opportunities to keep kids active and engaged.

Rural North Dakota has always been resilient, but resilience requires resources. SB 2097 ensures that small towns like Souris have the tools to not just survive but thrive.

Whether it's a grain farmer needing better roads to haul their crop or an oil worker relying on local services to support their family, these investments will make a tangible difference in people's lives. More importantly, they will help retain and attract residents, ensuring that our rural communities remain vibrant and viable for generations to come.

I urge you to support SB 2097 and the creation of the Rural Community Endowment Fund. This bill is not just about funding—it's about securing the future of rural North Dakota. As someone who has dedicated my life to working in and supporting rural areas, I can't overstate the importance of this legislation. It's an investment in our families, our industries, and our future.

Thank you for your time and consideration.

Sincerely,
Cody Hilliard
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