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Testimony of Angelle French
Pembina County Job Development Authority
In Favor Senate Bill 2228
February 7, 2025

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

On behalf of the Pembina County Job Development Authority (PCJDA), I am writing to express our strong support for Senate Bill 2228, which seeks to provide an appropriation to the Department of Commerce for a Rural Grocery Store Sustainability and Food Access Expansion Grant Program. This vital initiative has already demonstrated its effectiveness in helping rural communities retain access to essential goods and services, and we urge your support to continue and expand its impact.

The PCJDA has firsthand experience with the success of this grant program. Through Component Two of the grant, our community of Crystal, with a population of just 111, was able to retain a vital convenience store that serves as more than just a place to buy gas. This store is the town's only restaurant, a key social gathering space, and an important economic driver. Recognizing the significance of this establishment, the community came together and raised over \$100,000 toward its purchase. However, despite this extraordinary local effort, it was not enough to fully acquire and sustain the store.

With the assistance of this grant, the Crystal Community Boosters were able to complete the purchase of the store under a nonprofit ownership model and lease it to a for-profit operator. This structure has proven to be an effective model for small rural communities, as it lowers the cost of entry for potential operators and alleviates the significant financial burden of acquiring a building and startup inventory. Without this grant, the future of this essential business would have been uncertain, potentially leaving the residents of Crystal without a convenient source of food, meals, and a central community hub.

The success of this program in Crystal demonstrates the critical role that state support can play in sustaining rural food access. These businesses are lifelines in small towns, providing not only food access but also employment opportunities and a space for social connection. The nonprofit ownership, for-profit operation model supported by this grant allows for long-term sustainability and ensures that rural communities remain viable places to live and work.

We strongly encourage your support of Senate Bill 2228 to ensure that other rural communities across North Dakota have access to the same opportunities that have benefited Crystal. By continuing to fund this grant program, the state can empower rural towns to preserve essential services and maintain their economic vitality.

Thank you for your time and consideration. We appreciate your commitment to strengthening North Dakota's rural communities, and we urge you to support Senate Bill 2228.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read "Angelle French", written in a cursive style.

Angelle French
Executive Director
Pembina County Job Development Authority