

Testimony of Dawn Mandt in support of SB 2390
To the Senate Agriculture and Veterans Affairs
Friday, February 7, 2025

Chairman Luick, Vice Chairwoman Myrdal, and Committee Members,

My name is Dawn Mandt, and I'm the Executive Director of the Red River Regional Council in Grafton. Our team serves Region 4, which includes 41 rural communities in Nelson, Pembina, Walsh, and Grand Forks counties in the northeast corner of North Dakota.



I am submitting this testimony in strong support of SB 2228.

Region 4 received two grant awards from this program in 2023/2024

We are grateful for your approval of this pilot program in 2023. It is critical in keeping our communities' access to food. **Our region received two awards from this program a year ago. One was to conduct a Rural Food Access Feasibility Study and one was to support the Crystal community in retaining their sole source of food.** While studies are not favored for this grant funding, our study provided crucial information about market assessment.

Within the study grant, we had the rare opportunity to subscribe to Placer.ai and test drive this unique data tool. Placer is a location analytics tool that provides information such as customer foot traffic such as number of visits and length of stay and monthly and yearly comparisons. This data assisted us in developing a preliminary market assessment and helped the residents of Crystal save their city's food store. Data for rural areas can be hard to come by – however, this real-time data tool rooted in cell phone data, revealed a surprising number of customers rely on this facility in this very small town. Without our food feasibility study grant award, we would not have had a subscription to this data tool as the annual subscription is \$12,000.

Crystal Booster Club buys local convenience store to preserve food access

Crystal, pop. 112, is located on Highway 66 between Highways 18 and 32 in Pembina County. It has an elementary school, a post office, and several agricultural service businesses. Because of the city's location on the Dakota Northern Railroad, a feeder to BNSF, Crystal is home to a large-scale Columbia Grain International handling facility that has more than 50 employees and receives 7 to 8 million bushels a year. **Roadside 66, the city's only café, grocery and fuel store, closed in December 2023 after the owner retired and was unable to find a buyer.**

Crystal Community Boosters, a nonprofit volunteer organization, raised over \$100,000 in local donations before they called upon the Pembina County JDA and Regional Council to assist in

planning and project development. With their match in hand, we developed the business model and an application to the Food Access Grant application. These funds enabled the Booster Club to buy the convenience store approximately a year ago.

Mayor Larry McCollum shared yesterday:

*“Our project went smooth. The community got what they were after by putting the project together. **It’s one thing to have it for the community and another to make money.** We are still trying to help as we need to replace some equipment. **It was a 10 on a scale of one to 10.** We haven’t yet rented the apartment as it is being used to produce baked good sold in the store. We are a bit more active again ... this project reenergized the Booster Club and we have more project ideas.”*

The Private / Public Partnership Model

The regional council, along with Nelson and Pembina County job development authorities, has provided and/or helped secure funding for grocery stores in six cities – nearly all grocery stores in Nelson County (Lakota, McVile, Michigan, and Tolna), and half the grocery stores in Pembina County (Pembina and Walhalla). The grocery store in Lakota has closed, and the stores in McVile and Tolna has changed owners a couple times.

Our rural grocery and fresh food stores are essential businesses, yet fragile.

After the grocery store in Michigan (pop. 263) closed in 2008, **we developed the private/public partnership business model.** The Michigan JDA bought the grocery store and leased to a private business owner. The community raised local funds, and we were able to pursue grants for the purchase and replace coolers equipment. This business is still a favored business today in Nelson County today. And this is a business model that we continue to repeat in our small towns. **We also know that these projects are not feasible without the grant funds provided through this proposed Program. These projects cannot afford debt service on loans to remain viable.**

Access data is critical to defining the need

Briefly, back to the Placer data tool. Placer revealed:

- 300 people with the Crystal zip code
- Traffic increased from 10,900 people to 15,100 in 2024. Crystal is on the route to Pembina Gorge, Walhalla country club, Frost Fire Park and access to more than 400 miles of area snowmobile trails.
- Nearly 400 households in the census tract area around Crystal have “low access to food,” meaning they must drive 10 miles or more to a grocery store.
- Eighty-three (83) households are considered low income, low access households.

While we may think driving 10 or 20 miles or more to the grocery is normal, **only 8% of rural residents in the entire nation must drive 10 to 20 miles or more to access a supermarket or grocery** (USDA). Sixty percent (60%) of Americans live within walking distance – less than a mile – from a grocery that sells fresh foods.

I urge your strong support for SB 2228.

*Dawn Mandt
Executive Director
701-520-0487*