

Testimony of Stacie Sevigny in Support of SB 2390

To the Senate Agriculture and Veterans Affairs

February 6, 2025

Sen. Luick and members of the Senate Agriculture and Veterans Affairs Committee:

My name is Stacie Sevigny and I am the Executive Director of the Walsh County Job Development Authority (WCJDA). I am writing in support of SB 2390.

Rural communities aren't dying. They provide the support network needed for our vital agricultural industry. In NE ND, they also support our effective manufacturing industry, with 20 small and large manufacturers employing approximately 1,200 people in Walsh and Pembina counties.

Realistically, our larger urban neighbors need us as well. For example, more than half of the sales tax collected in Grand Forks comes from visitors and commuting patterns show an interdependence between small towns and larger cities, like those in Region 4 (Walsh, Pembina, Nelson, and Grand Forks counties).

Rural areas have challenges just as more urban areas do, but the lift is often heavier due to size and scale. What we focus on grows, and our rural areas need some of the spotlight pointed their way. SB 2390 aims to do that.

One of the most important aspects of the Rural Catalyst/Challenge Grant is that it integrates the state's eight regional councils. RCs are already the "boots on the ground" in every county in the state. They are led by more than 200 local officials and community leaders. There may not be a better way to ensure rural communities are able to apply for projects that support quality of life improvement projects – everything from wall murals to housing to childcare centers.

It being a matching grant program requires local buy-in. This ensures projects that are applied for come to fruition. Additionally, it being a grant program allows time for a statewide portfolio to be developed showing impacts and understanding of rural needs. The goal is this will result in a portfolio of statewide impacts – a justification for a later endowment fund.

Examples of projects in Walsh County and Region 4 that could be future applicants of this program include:

- **Walsh County Childcare Center:** A turn-key childcare center that a provider will rent to operate her/his private childcare business from in an effort to increase childcare slots. This project is currently under construction on Grafton's Main Street and is expected to add 35 much-needed slots in Walsh County.

- **Housing:** Market rate and low-income, single-family and multi-family. We need it all. The 2024 Region 4 Housing Study found that 50% of survey respondents know people who would like to move to the region but are unable to due to a lack of suitable housing.
- **Park River Early Learning Center:** Free universal preschool for 3- and 4-year-olds in the Park River Area School District. Parents will be able to pay a fee for wrap-around childcare as well, helping with this much-needed crisis. This project is under construction and should be completed this fall.
- **Wall murals, pocket parks, and other Main Street vibrancy projects:** Fordville, Park River, Minto, Grafton, Hoople, Edinburg, and Pisek. Many of these communities have recently completed Phase 1 of a project and have seen the positive impacts arts and culture bring to our rural communities. They are inspired and energized to do more and implement further phases. Each project brings added economic impact and community connectedness.
- **Community and Fitness Center Projects:** Both Park River and Grafton are working on the development of multi-million dollar community and/or fitness center projects. The net will be cast wide to secure funding and the state's Rural Catalyst Grant program could be an integral partner.

The impact of SB 2390 would greatly help to level the playing field for smaller communities competing for resources more readily available to our larger communities.

Sincerely,

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