

March 17, 2025

Senate Industry and Business
HB 1398

CHAIRMAN BARTA AND COMMITTEE MEMBERS:

My name is Amy Wobbema, and I am the publisher of the New Rockford Transcript and the Foster County Independent, two official county newspapers in central North Dakota. Please accept this written testimony IN FAVOR of House Bill 1398.

The law governing publication of insurance abstracts has existed since the state's earliest days. The change we seek now is to codify the actual practice that has been used to publish these notices since at least 1930.

As the law stands, the insurance commissioner has the discretion to decide in which newspapers the abstracts will be published. For nearly 100 years, however, the insurance commissioner's office and the newspaper association have had an unwritten agreement to spread the publication of abstracts across ALL of North Dakota's newspapers. For decades we've agreed that it's the most equitable way to distribute the abstracts of some 2,000 insurance companies operating in our state.

HB 1398 was introduced because the insurance commissioner decided to upend our long-standing equitable practice and instead concentrate publication into just eight newspapers - namely the newspaper with the largest circulation in each district. Due to this decision, the majority of publications will now be concentrated in the state's biggest cities, rather than spread evenly across both rural and urban areas. That means readers of the other 65 newspapers, including The New Rockford Transcript and Foster County Independent, will not see even one insurance abstract in their local paper this year.

This simple amendment to the existing state law will ensure that publication of insurance company financial statements does not ebb and flow at the whim of a commissioner who questions their importance. In light of the pressures facing the insurance industry, which Mr. Godfreed noted in a January op-ed to

newspapers, consumers need information about the financial health of insurance companies operating in our state now more than ever.

I urge a DO PASS on HB 1398.

Sincerely,

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Abstract publication IS economic development for newspapers – bringing in revenue from outside of the state. There is no doubt that cutting 65 of the state’s 73 newspapers from receiving this income will have an impact on the financial health of newspapers. If the law stands without the proposed amendment, the next time a state agency needs vital, timely information disseminated to the state’s 300,000-plus newspaper readers, they may find fewer outlets available to help them reach that audience. We urge a DO PASS on this amendment.