

## **TESTIMONY IN SUPPORT OF SENATE BILL NO. 2251**

Chair and Members of the Committee,

My name is Matt Fern, and I am a filmmaker from Bismarck, North Dakota. I produce commercials, documentaries, and video podcasts throughout our state, and I am here today to express my strong support for Senate Bill 2251.

I support this bill because I have witnessed firsthand the lack of transparency from the North Dakota Department of Commerce regarding their allocation of public grant funds. In 2021 and 2023, ND Commerce awarded all available film grants, a total of \$700,000, to the same media production company to produce three completely different feature length films, shutting out several other well-qualified applicants. These “Motion Picture Production & Recruitment” grants sparked many questions about transparency and accountability.

The “Transparency” section of ND Commerce’s website, where grant data for Commerce programs is supposed to be publicly reported, has not listed any reports from the tourism division which allocated the 2021 and 2023 grants, since I began checking the website in 2023. The media production company that received these grants has never publicly shared how the funds were spent or even publicly acknowledged receiving money from ND Commerce. This leaves North Dakota filmmakers and taxpayers in the dark about how these funds, intended to help grow our state’s media industry, were spent.

The best agency to provide oversight is the North Dakota Auditor’s Office. Unfortunately, their ability to investigate and audit a large grant recipient is limited. Senate Bill 2251 provides essential tools for the Auditor’s Office, including expanded subpoena powers and clearer guidelines for auditing financial transactions across state agencies. This bill ensures that taxpayer dollars are spent as intended and that state agencies remain accountable to the public.

When questions arise about large sums of taxpayer money, North Dakotans deserve clear answers. By supporting SB 2251, you help ensure that taxpayer dollars are monitored effectively and that any misuse or misallocation is identified and corrected. This oversight is essential not only for the integrity of our government agencies but also for the many creative and hardworking media professionals who call North Dakota home.

Thank you for considering my testimony. I respectfully urge you to support Senate Bill 2251 to strengthen our state’s commitment to accountability, transparency, and fairness. If you have any questions, I am happy to provide further information.