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Testimony on behalf of the North Dakota Council on the Arts

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Dear Chairman and members of the committee:

My name is Jessie Veeder Scofield, a musician, writer and director of a growing arts organization in McKenzie County. I'm honored to have the opportunity to address you today on behalf of our residents and in support of the North Dakota Council on the Arts.

Ten years ago, seemingly overnight, Watford City went from 1,200 people and dwindling to closer to 10,000. During this boom our leaders convened to come up with a plan to retain these new residents by providing them not just with a job, but with a quality of life. So, alongside the most crucial infrastructure plans we wrote: "Develop an arts organization." Our leaders believed in the ability of the arts not only to build and transform spaces, but to bring people together.

Our dreams materialize with the help of The North Dakota Council on the Arts. In four short years we have grown from a two-event organization to being in the middle of nearly every leadership, event, program and development discussion in our community.

But what does NDCA's support look like? It looks like providing affordable and accessible after school art classes to the kids who don't want to throw a ball, but may someday grow up to be an architect. It means we can hire an Artist in Resident from Nevada to spend two weeks with the high school art club to help them design a mural on the wall of their new school.

It looks like helping fund a new dance studio so that dozens of aspiring dancers don't have to make the drive across county lines. It means that studio can employ five dance teachers.

It means bringing in a concert series so that a second-generation farmer could be moved to tears by the voice of a world-renowned tenor from New York City without leaving his hometown.

It means making long winters shorter and connecting strangers over a shared laugh at a miss of a brush stroke.

I'm a 37-year-old ranch kid and I did not have this experience growing up in McKenzie County. As a budding young musician, I was told to head for the coasts, because you can't make a living here in North Dakota as an artist or a musician. I'm impassioned every day to make sure that statement is not true. With the help of the North Dakota Council on the Arts I believe we are making true headway here in our rural communities.

Because we NEED artists and musicians and creative outlets. Some of our most precious heirlooms are works of art. A hand-crafted fiddle that your great uncle played. Beaded moccasins that once pushed the prairie grass down during rain dances. Your grandmother's rosemaled wooden trunk that held her most valuable possessions.

Art holds sentiment, yes, but it also holds for us a tangible history in the songs we sing and the stories we tell. The NDCA honors our traditions by fostering and investing in apprenticeships where a master accordion player, for example, spends weeks teaching a teenager the instrument. There are dozens of examples, but I think we can all agree, maintaining our ties to tradition, especially in North Dakota, is important work.

The arts create a sense of place, they create destinations and they support Economic Development, not only by creating jobs, but by helping recruit those professionals we so desperately need by providing them with a unique, dynamic and engaging place to live, work and raise their families.

NDCA and the dozens of arts organizations that it helps across the state, WE do important work. I've seen the effects before my eyes. And so today I ask you to fully restore the program funds for the North Dakota Council on the Arts so that they can continue to make a positive difference in the lives of the residents, and future residents, of North Dakota.

Thank you for your time today.

Jessie Veeder Scofield
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