

Chairman Burckhard and Members of the Senate Political Subdivisions Committee,

My name is Roben Anderson, I am a taxpayer, property owner and resident of West Fargo. I serve on the West Fargo Special Assessment Commission (SAC). I was appointed to the SAC in 2018. I got involved wanting to learn more about Special Assessments and if anything could be done to improve the process.

In my time on the SAC, I've heard from many residents about their experiences with Special Assessments. This past summer the City of West Fargo assessed properties for various special assessment projects. The public hearings provided a lot of insight into how people feel about the process. There were a couple key points that were made by many of the residents. Those points were transparency and communication.

I've had the opportunity the last few years to discuss special assessments with Representative Schauer and other legislators in West Fargo, and through those discussions, HB 1381 was born. The intent of this bill is to help provide greater transparency and improvement in communication.

First, addressing transparency, many people do not know how or why a special assessment district is formed. There are instances where your neighbor might not be in the assessment district, or someone across the street from you, but you perceive them to be benefitting from the project. It's not until after everything is complete and the project is being assessed that people typically learn why the districts were drawn the way they were. Adding the requirement, of how a special assessment district was created, and what considerations were used to determine the properties that would benefit from the project, increases the equity and transparency of the special assessment process.

A couple examples of recent projects where a description like this would be useful are an arterial road reconstruction project and an upcoming storm sewer improvement project. Concerning the arterial road reconstruction project, there were properties just to the north of where the project and assessment district ended that could have been included in the assessment district. These properties were not, and it was not clear why until I asked the question during SAC public meetings that there may be a future project that would cover the north side of that district and city leaders didn't want to assess properties for multiple projects if it can be helped. Other questions were raised concerning the eastern boundary to the project as well. Having a description as to why the district was created how it was, would be helpful to inform the public and those in the assessment district before the project gets too far through the process.

For storm sewer districts, your neighbor may not be assessed when you are. Given the slope of the land, or pipes, or other things not always visible to the naked eye or commonly known outside of the city's engineering office, one may think that they aren't being assessed in an equitable manner. Including a brief description would allow for greater transparency and be a proactive approach to addressing the questions raised and contribute to the equity of the assessment.

The Engineer's Report is a document in the process that is provided to the City Commission prior to final approval of the project, before work begins. This addition to the Engineer's Report would help property owners answer the questions: "who will benefit, and why?" with greater clarity earlier in the process.

Second, regarding communication. I heard many people raise the issue that notifications of projects are only in newspapers. While there is an element of letters that get sent out in the mail, those sometimes get missed, discarded, or read and forgotten. Having notices published to the governing body's website

increases the audience to which the governing body is communicating with. Unfortunately, we've seen a decline in newspaper subscriptions, and many people are getting their information online, and if they're anything like me, they don't like going to a newspaper's website because there is a paywall, or you're inundated with ads. In my experience, I prefer to go directly to the City of West Fargo's website and get information. Having the information on the website allows for greater communication from the governing body as well, by way of alerts that are sent out when new content is posted (such as agendas or RFP's) and the ability to share on social media which is people's largest source of information.

Special Assessments get talked about a lot, and in depth. While I believe there is a lot more room for improvement to be made, I believe that this bill addresses a couple areas that are easy and cost-effective to address. I am requesting that the committee is aligned with the House Finance and Taxation Committee (13-0-1 Do Pass Recommendation) and the House Assembly (Unanimous Approval) and I am asking you for a DO PASS recommendation on HB 1381.

Thank you for your time and your service to the state and the residents of North Dakota.