

Testimony Prepared for the  
**Senate Finance and Taxation Committee**

January 24, 2023

By: John Saiki, Morton County Engineer

**RE: Support SB 2275 – Relating to removal of the \$400 million SIIF bucket right before the Prairie Dog Bucket.**

Chairman Kannianen and Senate Finance and Taxation Committee members, thank you for the opportunity to provide testimony on SB 2275. I am John Saiki, the Morton County Engineer. I am here to support the bill as proposed.

I have worked for the Morton County Highway Department as the County Engineer for almost 5 years.

Morton County is the seventh largest county in the State of North Dakota encompassing 1,936 square miles and a population of 31,000. The Highway Department maintains approximately 1,200 miles of roadway, 108 miles of paved highways, with the remainder gravel. The gravel roads range from collectors, County Routes which are maintained, to section line roads, which are considered minimum maintenance roads. The Highway Department maintains 187 bridges, many of which are aging. The majority of our bridges are timber bridges and are approaching the end of their operational lives. Morton County is not an oil producing county, so our revenues are limited to motor fuel taxes and tax levies. We are managing our limited funds to maintain and repair what we have, both roadways and bridges.

Gravel is an important commodity, one that is found in the County. The cost involved is the crushing of the gravel. We have a plan for crushing, for the next five years. The issue is with limited funds, we crush a limited amount each year despite the fact that more potential gravel is located at the selected location. Gravel crushing is an item where we see an increase in cost per cubic yard, each year. It would be beneficial to crush more gravel at each setting at the current bid price rather than multiple settings over several years.

In regard to bridges, the only answer is to replace many of them. We currently have two bridges - one posted at 12 tons, the other 9 tons and one is eligible for Federal Funding. The issue is the construction cost is estimated at over \$5,000,000. Our 20% match is still \$1,000,000 for one bridge. In the past, this bridge was used to move ag products. Now legal loads, 80,000 pounds, cannot be carried on this bridge, which is a real hardship for many of the farmers and ranchers in the area. Many of the bridges were designed and built 50 or more years ago, when traffic was less, smaller and much lighter. Morton County currently has 71 posted bridges, with postings ranging from 3 tons to 20 tons.

Our County Commission is very understanding regarding the cost of maintenance and repair. They have been very good about maintaining our budget and providing modest increases. Unfortunately, with fuel, equipment repairs and purchases, the amount of money available for

road and bridge maintenance has remained the same or slightly decreased due to inflation. The Prairie Dog funding is an opportunity to crush more gravel, improve our roads and replace or repair additional bridges. We recently received our first Prairie Dog distribution, which is very helpful with our transportation plan and we are thankful for these funds, although our needs continue. The timing of the next distribution of funds is unclear, but by removing the \$400 million SIIF bucket, the likelihood of Prairie Dog funds being a more consistent funding stream would be greatly improved and appreciated.

Chairman Kannianen and committee members, I want to reiterate that I support the bill as written. Approving these changes will mean additional funding and enable County Highway Departments an opportunity to better schedule maintenance and improve our aging infrastructure.