

Testimony of Julie Gemmill in Support of HB 1524

To the House Finance and Taxation Committee

February 3, 2025

Rep. Headland and members of the House Finance and Taxation Committee:

My name is Julie Gemmill and I live on a farm and ranch near Fordville, in Walsh County. I have served on the Walsh County Job Development Authority Board for approximately 10 years serving as Chairwoman for the past 8 years. I am the President of Walsh County Farmers Union and have held that position for the past four years. I have also served on the ND Farmers Union Board Policy and Action Committee for the past year. In the past, I served as board chair of First Care Health Center board of directors during a vital expansion project for the hospital. I support HB 1524 because it ensures sustained funding for regional councils – which are a vital partner in rural economic development, including Walsh County.

Living in a rural small town brings many challenges. We rely heavily on the expertise offered through our regional council to help provide guidance in programs that will benefit businesses and rural communities. This includes expertise in programs and funding resources related to ADA projects, childcare, grocery stores/food availability, and programs to help businesses start and expand.

Examples of projects that the Walsh County JDA has led or supported in partnership with the Red River Regional Council include:

- **Fordville Senior Center:** Securing and managing a federal CDBG grant of \$122,360 for the Fordville Senior Center. The project included accessibility improvements, exterior rehabilitation, and electrical updates.
- **Walsh County Childcare Center:** Securing funding to renovate an existing building on Grafton's main street into a turn-key childcare center. A private provider will rent the space to operate her/his private childcare business from to increase available childcare slots. Total project is \$1.4 million, with more than \$680,000 in grants secured. We are hopeful the provider will begin operating from the building next week.
- **Rural Access Distribution (RAD) Coop:** Providing expertise in developing a partnership between three grocery stores in Walsh County to ensure products are delivered to schools and communities in a timely manner and at a fair price. The RAD coop continues to work on a pilot food locker system that will allow patrons of Fordville and Park River to order the grocery items online through the distribution center located in Park River at Jim's Super Valu.
- **Workforce Attraction & Retention:** In a highly competitive hiring market, our employers have repeatedly shared that they need to be able share what we have to offer – beyond their

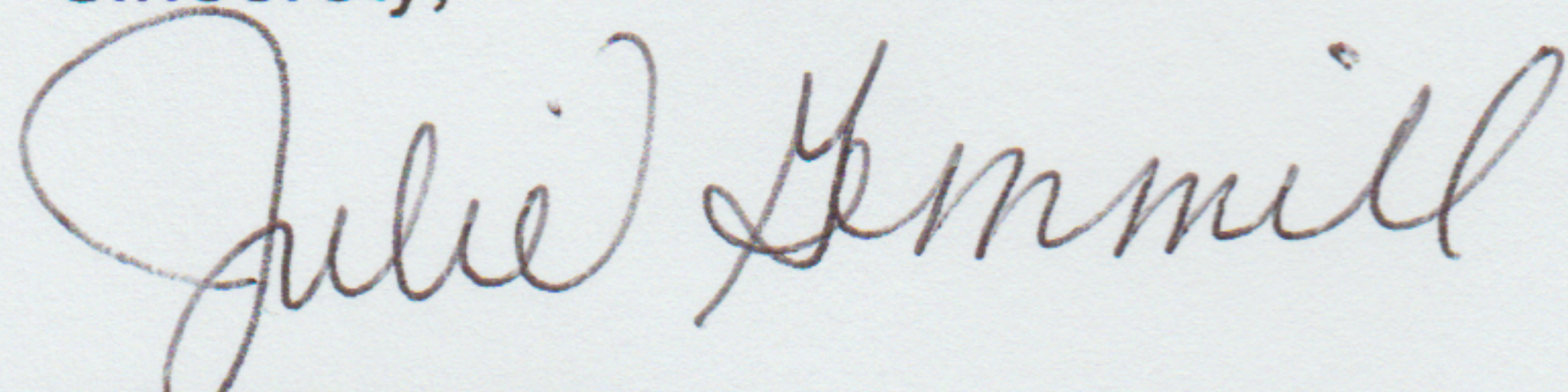
company. Potential hires want to know what it's like to work, live, and play here. This led to the creation of the state's first rural workforce attraction and retention initiative, Real. Good. Northeast ND. The regional council secured the funding and staff and in collaboration with our employers, developed this initiative that continues to grow. (www.realgoodnd.com).

- **FlexPACE:** This program has been vital to the growth and expansion of businesses in our county. The regional council has been an integral part of ensuring local lenders utilize the program. Projects the JDA provided the Community Match for in 2024 include everything from an electrician business start-up to a multi-million dollar equipment purchase at an existing value-added agriculture company.
- **Community Vibrancy:** Assisting communities and community groups across our county to access funding programs to help with projects that enhance our small towns. Examples include Kid's Alley, an indoor play space in Grafton; a pocket park on Fordville's main street; and a professional wall mural on Park River's main street.

Additionally, the JDA leverages regional council staff to serve as its full-time executive director and part-time fiscal manager. This partnership has allowed the volunteer JDA board of directors to lead and support projects it would otherwise be unable to without this economic development staff expertise. The Impact of HB 1524 would greatly help to level the playing field for smaller communities competing for state and federal resources.

In closing, I urge you to support this critical funding bill for Regional Councils statewide.

Sincerely,



Julie Gemmill

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