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February 4th, 2025

Testimony of Jennifer Dusek in support of HB 1524

To House Finance and Taxation Committee

Chairman Headland and members of the Committee:

I am Jennifer Dusek, Community Development Director for the City of Grafton.

I'm seeking your consideration to support funding of \$8 million for regional councils to increase rural development capacity across the state.

Created by NDCC 54-40.1 in 1973, the regional councils were to serve the purpose of establishing statewide policy for planning, economic development programs, operation, coordination, and related cooperative activities of state/local governments to resolve issues and problems transcending individual jurisdictions. Yet, these organizations have not had a consistent long-term funding mechanism to meet this purpose. This bill will provide councils with the expertise and resources needed to help rural communities access funding, implement projects, and drive economic development including regional collaborations.

The Red River Regional Council has been essential in Region 4 for support in rural development, housing and infrastructure, workforce growth, and improving essential services. Our small towns do not have the capacity to lead complex projects. Most do not have economic development staff, but the communities have great needs and potential. They simply lack the expert support needed to access funding and resources and execute strategic planning. This is where the regional council has been a great asset in our region.

The RRRC has financed 10 business projects in Grafton, most of which provide essential services to our residents, directly impacting the quality of life here. They have partnered with and supported North Valley Career and Tech Center to increase workforce training and education to high school students. They led the creation of a 532 Hill Food Incubator intended to address food insecurity and train new food businesses in our region. Two apartment buildings were redeveloped, and 30 homes were rehabbed in past years. The RRRC is an expert in strategic planning and has been a primary driver to address economic needs for rural communities. Yet, they lack the necessary funding to provide the level of support that our communities desperately need.

I urge your support for increasing the rural development capacity across the state by supporting this amendment for \$8 million for the eight regional councils.

Respectfully submitted by Jennifer Dusek, District 19