

ND Legislature advances bill to back rural improvement projects

Different bill to create 'Rural Community Endowment Fund' struck down

BY PEYTON HAUG
Forum News Service

BISMARCK — In place of legislation seeking to establish a permanent investment fund to support rural North Dakota, the House took a short-term approach and approved a bill to establish a grant program for improvement projects in small communities.

Failed Senate Bill 2097 originally proposed using \$50 million in state dollars to create a "Rural Community Endowment Fund" to be managed by the state treasury. After moving through the Senate, the proposed allocation was reduced to \$5 million.

The House made further changes to the bill before it was ultimately

scrapped with a 72-20 vote.

Those changes included a rule directing the treasury to withhold dispersing the money from the fund until its principal reached \$10 million, half of which must have been provided by non-state sources, such as donations.

"It's truly just a casualty of the budget at this stage of the game," said Rep. Jon Nelson, R-Rugby. "We're going to have to make some tough decisions. This is just one of them."

Strengthen ND, a rural community development nonprofit, released a statement following Tuesday's decision.

"SB 2097 was a bill authored by rural North Dakotans, for rural North



Jenny Schlecht / Agweek

A road runs from Interstate 94 at Windsor, North Dakota, to a farm.

Dakotans," Megan Langley, the group's executive director, said in the release.

"The Legislature had an opportunity to affirm that rural communities are a vital part of North Dakota's future. While they ultimately chose more short-term approaches over a long-term solution, that decision, though disappointing, doesn't close the door

on what's possible," she said.

The House Appropriations Committee discussed including parts of SB 2097 under Senate Bill 2390, which seeks to create a "Rural Catalyst Fund."

The fund would use \$5 million in state dollars for one-time funding to provide grants for "economic development" projects in communities with



Tanner Ecker / The Bismarck Tribune

Rep. Jon Nelson, R-Rugby, speaks during a House session on March 26 at the North Dakota Capitol.

3,000 people or less.

The bill requires at least half of the grant funds to go to communities with fewer than 1,500 people.

Grant recipients are to match one dollar of "non-state" funds to every dollar the state provides, according to the bill.

A committee comprised of people on the local, regional and state levels would determine recipi-

ents of the funds.

The bill passed the House with a 68-24 vote on Tuesday and will go back to the Senate for second consideration.

"The need hasn't gone away. The momentum hasn't gone away. And neither have we," Langley said.

Readers can reach Forum reporter Peyton Haug at 608-397-6073.



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