

Phone-free classroom bills advance in Legislature

Senate, House versions have differences that need ironed out

By Michael Achterling and Jeff Beach
North Dakota Monitor
North Dakota lawmakers passed bills April 7 that would prohibit student cellphone use during the school day, reviving one bill that had been defeated last week.
Senate Bill 2354 and House Bill 1160 differ on which schools would be affected and whether school districts would have the power to allow cellphone use during noninstructional time, such as in between classes or over the school lunch period. The bills are expected to have their differences ironed out in conference committees, each made up of three legislators from each chamber.
Senate Bill 2354 passed the House on a 61-29 vote.
The Senate bill, amended by the House Education Committee, would require all schools, public and private, to follow the statewide student cellphone ban. The House bill would only affect public school students.
Under the Senate bill, stu-

dents would be allowed to stow their phones in their lockers while turned off, or on silent, instead being secured in a lockbox or lockable pouch purchased by the school district.
School boards would also have the ability to create their own cellphone policies for student-use during noninstructional time under the Senate bill. The House bill would ban the use of the devices from “bell to bell.”
Rep. Anna Novak, R-Hazen, voted in favor of the Senate bill and said limiting cellphone use would have a positive impact on the mental health of students.
“Each school district knows what’s best for their respective schools and should be allowed to tailor their own policy based on their school’s needs as long as it fits in the parameters of this bill,” Novak said.
Rep. Daniel Johnston, R-Kathryn, said he voted against the bill because it regulates private schools the same as public schools.
“We should limit it to public school,” Johnston said.
Both bills allow students access to their phones while traveling between learning sites, such as career and technical academies.
The bills also require school districts to collect data on their cellphone policies to

judge the impact on student behavior, mental health, disciplinary incidents, school attendance and academic performance. The districts will report the data to the Department of Public Instruction, which will be compiled into an annual report.
Sen. Michelle Axtman, R-Bismarck, requested a revote in the Senate after missing April 4’s vote where the House bill failed.
She said if local school districts had been more proactive on phone policies, the bill would not have been necessary.
She said passing it would be “one of the most impactful things we do for teacher retention in North Dakota.”
The bill passed the Senate on a 42-4 reconsidered vote.
Sen. Mark Enget, R-Powers Lake, was among those who switched their vote from no to yes. He said he felt school districts in his part of the state had done a good job managing phone use, but also learned that’s not the case statewide.
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Sudden FEMA grant cuts leave ND towns in the lurch

Affects projects in Washburn, Lincoln and Fessenden

By Michael Standaert
ND News Cooperative
A sudden cancellation of Federal Emergency Management Agency grants supporting over \$20 million worth of disaster mitigation infrastructure projects across the state has communities scrambling to figure out their next moves.
An April 4 press release from FEMA announcing the cuts characterized the Building Resilient Infrastructure and Communities program as “wasteful and ineffective” and “more concerned with political agendas than helping Americans affected by natural disasters.”
The statement said ending the program aligns with the Trump administration and Homeland Security Secretary Kristi Noem’s ideas on how to best support states and local communities in disaster response, planning and recovery.
Washburn, Fessenden and Lincoln are three North Dakota communities that could be severely impacted. Planning on projects was years in the making. In some cases, local funds were already spent for design, engineering, environmental reviews and legal work.
Keli Berglund, mayor of Lincoln, just southeast of Bismarck, said cost estimates on the much-needed sewer wastewater regionalization project had doubled just in the past year from around \$10 million to \$20 million.
The FEMA grant would have helped cover \$7.8 million in costs associated with the project, which has been in the planning phase since 2019, she said.
“Now what do we do?” Berglund asked. “We are, if not at capacity, we are near capacity,” to handle wastewater.
“One big flood and who knows?” she added.
Engineering costs already total over \$200,000, she said. Adding in other legal fees and easement contracts brings the total much higher for what’s already been spent.



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“We’re literally looking at hundreds of thousands of dollars,” Berglund said.
“I’m hopeful there’ll be a resolution either by FEMA releasing the funds or legislators stepping in,” she said.
Chelsey Brandt, city auditor in Washburn, said the \$7.1 million in FEMA grant money was set to go toward a new water intake system that was “years in the making.”
Washburn hasn’t spent much on the project so far, she said, since most of the planning was being conducted by Garrison Diversion Conservancy District.
“I guess that just puts us back to the drawing board of trying to see if we are pursuing a new intake if that’s the way Washburn wants to go,” Brandt said.
In Fessenden, with just under 500 residents, a \$1.9 million BRIC grant was meant to upgrade a wastewater lagoon that’s over 100 years old, making it the oldest in the U.S. along with a lagoon in San Antonio.
“Anything that’s 102 years old obviously needs some work,” said Tammy Roehrich, Wells County emergency manager.
The project would have involved dredging, stabilizing and wrapping the banks. Bids for work on the project were set to go out on May 1, Roehrich said. Fessenden had already spent around \$165,000 in upfront planning costs.
Another BRIC grant in Wells County was meant to cover \$366,000 in costs for a new generator at SMP Health-St. Aloisius Medical Center, but that’s been canceled as well.
Similarly, a \$132,000 grant for a new generator for Carington Medical Center in Fos-

ter County was also canceled.
Most of the remaining BRIC grants that were axed were for flood and flood risk reduction studies.
Another 19 projects that FEMA has already obligated to fund are now under review, so those are currently in limbo. Included in those are a grant for \$262,000 for a downtown core area flood study and \$278,000 for a sewer system lift study, both for West Fargo.
A study from the National Institute of Building Sciences in 2018 found that every dollar spent on hazard mitigation resulted in an estimated \$6 saved on recovery costs, and North Dakota surpasses the national average at around \$6.54 saved per \$1 spent.
The state estimates that mitigation investments in the state have already saved over \$1.9 billion in recovery costs.
According to an April 8 statement issued by the state Department of Emergency Services, Gov. Kelly Armstrong has directed state agencies to work with local communities to explore options and find other solutions for key infrastructure projects.
Darin Hanson, director of Homeland Security, a division within the Department of Emergency Services, said his department is working on trying to find alternative funding sources including state programs.
“They’re important projects, they really are,” Hanson said.
Asked if any of these projects fit the description of being wasteful, ineffective or politicized, Hanson didn’t agree.
“I think in North Dakota, we really try to keep the politics out of these public safety decisions,” Hanson said. “You know, we see that in the fires from last year. It’s neighbors helping neighbors, so I don’t think it’s as big of an issue in North Dakota.”
Hanson said North Dakota has been a national leader in mitigation projects like the ones impacted by a loss of federal funding.
“We want to keep trying to find ways to get these projects done because they’re important,” Hanson said. “If you look at where we’ve done projects in other parts of the state, it’s made a big difference.”

Time-change bill killed by Senate after amendments

Was revised to propose daylight time year-round, then voted down

By Jeff Beach
North Dakota Monitor
North Dakotans will keep changing their clocks twice a year.
The state Senate on April 7 voted 32-15 to defeat House Bill 1259 that would have eliminated seasonal time changes.

Just before the vote to kill the bill, it was amended to put North Dakota on year-round daylight saving time.
The original bill called for year-round standard time, which passed the House 55-37.
Supporters of using daylight saving time cited advantages for evening recreation and construction. Some construction projects are not allowed to start before 7 a.m.
There also were concerns in border cities with North Dakota being on a different time than its neighbors.
The bill was amended to take

effect only when neighboring states also had dropped the time change.
Sen. Michael Dwyer, R-Bismarck, argued against the bill, saying that if Congress or a neighboring state makes a change, to leave the decision up to future lawmakers.
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Bill would provide support to state’s only food bank

Great Plains is looking to build new distribution facility in Fargo

By Ann Estvold
ND Newspaper Association
Great Plains Food Bank, the only food bank in the state, is looking to build a new distribution facility in Fargo to better serve the needs of North Dakotans who are experiencing food insecurity.
House Bill 1143 would grant \$10 million to the organization to be used to help build its new warehouse.
Great Plains Food Bank has distribution centers in Bismarck and Fargo and has partnerships with 196 food pantries, soup kitchens and shelters throughout North Dakota and in Clay County, Minnesota. The Fargo distribution center is the main hub for the organization. It serves about 100 communities whose residents

lack access to a sufficient food supply.
“This includes rural towns, tribal nations and urban centers, ensuring everyone has access to nutritious food,” said Darby Njos, a spokeswoman for Great Plains Food Bank.
The Great Plains Food Bank receives food from farmers, growers and other donors and is supplied food from industry sources that otherwise would go to waste. The organization then distributes the food to pantries and soup kitchens.
“Currently our biggest hurdle is inadequate infrastructure to recover and distribute the volume of food necessary to meet the needs of our neighbors,” Njos said.
The current Fargo facility needs maintenance and is expected to outgrow its current location within eight years anyway, said Melissa Sobolik, the chief executive officer of Great Plains Food Bank.
In October, Great Plains Food Bank purchased nine acres of land in Fargo to build its new facility, which

is planned for about 70,500 square feet. It would have an allergen-free repacking room and volunteer and community space. It would also increase space for storage, including room for refrigerated and frozen goods. It should be sufficient to support the organization for another 40 to 50 years, Sobolik said.
The organization has about one-third of the money it needs for the new facility, Sobolik said. So far, its state funding has been limited to \$1 million in 2024 to buy local foods. Most of Great Plains’ financial support comes from government grants and local donations.
The Great Plains Food Bank was opened as the Greater Fargo-Moorhead Area Food Bank in 1983 and has expanded to serve 196 food pantries, soup kitchens and shelters throughout North Dakota.
The food bank also provides programs to support school-age children, summer meals, “senior food boxes” for older customers, and mobile food pantries.



Apprentice Line worker – Seasonal position (1,000 Hours)

Burke-Divide Electric Cooperative is hiring (3) Seasonal - Apprentice Line Workers for the 2025 construction season (1,000 hours). Positions will be located in the Kenmare, Columbus and Crosby outposts.

POSITION SUMMARY AND MAJOR RESPONSIBILITIES:

- Perform construction, maintenance, and operating activities on energized or de-energized overhead and underground electric transmission and distribution systems.
- Knowledge of construction and maintenance procedures for distribution and transmission facilities. Training and experience in the area of electrical line work.
- Knowledge of standard RUS construction specifications and BDEC specific requirements.
- Knowledge, support, and enforcement of applicable personal and public safety codes and practices.
- Operates all types of vehicles, construction, maintenance, and safety equipment.
- Works within the current IBEW labor agreement.
- Available after normal hours to respond to outages, scheduled work, and other member needs when needed.
- Maintains material inventories and completes required documentation for assigned vehicle and projects to assure proper material records are kept.
- Performs public relations needs and activities in the area. Spokesman for the cooperative as needed.
- Use electronic, oral, and written communication skills for daily operations and records documentation.
- Pole climbing, heavy lifting, and other strenuous activities are required. Works in severe outdoor weather.
- Troubleshooting, transformer and secondary work, service connects and disconnects, bill collecting.
- Keeps informed of and provides support for Cooperative goals, policies, plans, and programs to assist the Cooperative in providing services which meet the expectations of our customer and to allow the Cooperative to continue to be a positive influence within its service area.
- Perform other duties and activities as may be assigned from time to time.

OTHER REQUIREMENTS

- Current Class A Commercial Driver's License & Medical DOT certification
- Graduate of an approved line worker training course
- Physical capability to perform electrical line maintenance & construction duties
- Physical examination and drug testing requirements

To apply, please submit an application, resume and cover letter to hannah@bdec.coop or mail to Burke-Divide Electric Cooperative, PO Box 6, Columbus, ND 58727.

The BDEC employment application can be found at: www.bdec.coop/employment or by contacting Human Resources at 701-939-6671 or email hannah@bdec.coop.

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