Special Session Legislative Report and what comes next

By Sen. Janne Myrdal
North Dakota District 19

The Legislature spent last week at Special Session called by the Governor. He opened the special session, as directed by the Constitution, with a State of the State address he called "a pivotal step forward in strengthening North Dakota healthcare across the state."

The special session convened so the legislature could accept the grant from the Centers for Medicare and Medicaid Services as part of the federal Rural Health Transformation Program and ensure the state complies with requirements to receive the first year of funding. The legislature must appropriate the money before it can be spent under state law. ND was awarded $199 million for first-year federal monies for the state's rural health transformation program with potential close to $900 million combined over the next 5 years. The guidelines are very strict, or maybe tight is a better word, so the legislature must approve some new policy to unlock said funding. "75% of North Dakota's rural counties face primary care shortages". These challenges demand bold action," Governor Armstrong said, adding the funding gives the state "the chance to be the healthiest state in the nation. We're not constructing new buildings. We are not standing up unsustainable programs, and we are not propping up underperforming programs that haven't made North Dakota."

We approved a package of five bills this week, giving state officials the legal authority to spend nearly $398 million, over the coming biennium, in federal funds and enact policy tied to a one-year $199 million grant aimed at improving rural healthcare.

The most significant of the bills, HB 1623, authorizes the appropriation of up to $397,873,940 from federal funds to the Department of Health and Human Services for rural health transformation grants through June 30, 2027. It also includes exemptions to allow more flexible use of federal dollars and reporting requirements to the legislature.

In addition, we passed policy bills to meet federal grant conditions, including measures related to healthcare workforce and access. I served on the policy committee that heard and forwarded these bills to the full assembly:

• HB 1621 amends state law to implement workforce and preventive health measures, aligning with federal priorities that could influence the state's eligibility for future funding.

• SB 2401 requires additional nutritional training for physicians as a condition tied to federal requirements.

• HB 1622 allows the state to join a multistate physician assistant licensure compact, making it easier for out-of-state practitioners to work in North Dakota.

• SB 2402 expands the scope of practice for pharmacists to improve rural access to care.

The funding is an opportunity to improve care in rural counties where provider shortages and long travel distances challenge residents. I have visited extensively with rural health care providers, school superintendents, fire dйpartements and local subdivisions about applying for these monies in the period between now and September 1st. A huge focus brought forward is need for behavioral health services. Again, the criterion for funding is wrapped in strict conditions and scrutiny and requires innovation and sustainability. To follow this process and have updated information I highly recommend signing up for updates at https://public.govdelivery.com/accounts/NDDHHS/subscriber/new?topic_id=NDDHHS_189

Health and Human Services expect to begin awarding some subgrants in early 2026, prioritizing workforce development, telehealth expansion, preventive care, and better technology and data connections among rural providers. Again, please stay informed by clicking on link above and receive updates.,

The Legislative management team received an update on forecasted budget for the upcoming 2027-29 biennium. As many have seen in the news, the largest investor in the Bakken oil field is halting any new drilling indefinitely due to downturn of oil prices. We are predicting a general fund balance of $200- 300 million going into next biennium. Compare that with around $1.3 billion last balance at beginning of 25-27 biennium. That is a shortfall of $1 billion. What it means is we will have possibly $1billion less in the budget, and the biennium after that even predicted less. These are serious numbers to take into consideration as we look forward.

Which leads into an issue of policy we voted on in regard to universal free breakfast and lunch program in K-12 schools. This was not an issue that has come up with constituents until this week, nor with extensive visits with several superintendents or parents. However, the possibility that a constitutional measure, to that effect, may occur on the November ballot, it was brought forward. I voted no to this massive change in ND policy for reasons so numerous I could fill pages in this paper with them. At the end of the day, NO child goes hungry in our schools, and the free or reduced meal program meets the needs of families who rightfully need it. North Dakota currently provides free lunches to children from families earning up to 225% of the federal poverty level, which is approximately $84,000 per year.

If we were to extend free meals to all students, it would result in the loss of federal funding, as families would no longer feel the need to apply for free and reduced lunch programs. This could mean forfeiting about $15 million in federal assistance. All the superintendents I have spoken to have highlighted the loss of payment per pupil and foundation losses that likely would occur. This would hurt all our rural schools' future existence.

It is important to note that there are currently no children denied lunch for any reason. If a student's lunch account has a zero balance, no questions are asked. This policy is already included in century code and was enacted in 2023.

Given the decline in oil prices and the fact that 51% of our state revenues depend on oil extraction and production taxes, I considered it fiscally irresponsible to commit to an initiative that would incur costs of approximately $150 million per biennium—costs that are expected to increase each biennium. Additionally, with recent reports indicating that oil companies are halting drilling operations in the state unless oil prices rebound to $60 per barrel, they may only deplete their existing drilled reserves without further exploration, leading to a potential funding shortfall sooner rather than later.

We also passed a property tax relief program during the last legislative session, with the goal of having nearly 100% of homeowners pay no property taxes. Implementing free lunches for students could divert funds necessary for property tax relief, which I continue to hear is a top priority for my constituents.

I serve on the social services zone board in our region and am aware of needs that exists. That is why I believe in efforts that are long term solutions to help people out of generational poverty, not sustain their current condition. Again, all kids are well fed while in school and most schools have weekend backpack meal programs. There are many discussions to be had on this topic, none of which was heard or discussed at length in the short timeline of a three-day session. I will write a more detailed report on this in the coming weeks.

Lastly, we passed a bill that clarifies Home Tax Credit and Standardizes PRC Calculation aimed at fixing an inconsistency in how North Dakota's primary residence credit (PRC) is applied to homeowners' tax bills. HB 1626 ensures taxpayers receive the full benefit lawmakers promised when they created the PRC. That discrepancy exposed a broader problem with how counties were layering the state's 5 percent early-payment discount on top of the primary residence credit. This fix honors the Legislature's promise to homeowners and counties will have clear direction for future tax years, and homeowners who qualify for the primary residence credit are expected to see the full benefit reflected on their property tax statements.

Meanwhile stay warm and safe!

Special Session: My vote and why i oppose a Constitutional mandate

By Rep. David Monson
North Dakota District 19

I don't do Facebook myself but read it occasionally. Rep. Kathy Froelich of District 15 from the Devils Lake area said it perfectly on Facebook, in my opinion. I voted on the bills she mentioned just as she did for the same reasons in the recent special legislative session, so I will mention that now if you are into Facebook and wish to read her post for yourself. Just to be clear, I oppose putting ANY spending mandates in the Constitution. I didn't like HB1624. It had several flaws, one being mandating all schools, both public and private, provide both breakfast and lunch for all at no cost whether they have staff or even facilities in their school to do this. Local control goes away on this issue. The price tag on that bill was $65,000,000 for 1 year. The cost for the next biennium would be $130,000,000. I much preferred HB1627 put forth by Rep. Dressler as it would have insured students in families of 4 would have free or reduced-price meals if their income was over $99,000 in 2025. That changes each year depending on inflation. That bill failed by a few votes on the House floor and thus never got to the Senate for a vote.

I want to add a few more comments just to further clarify my position. There is no such thing as a FREE lunch. Someone is paying for it. I received a couple emails accusing legislators of getting our meals paid for by the taxpayers of ND. I'm not sure where that misconception started, but it is a false assumption held by many for a long time. The only time a legislator gets meals paid for by you, the ND taxpayer, is when we travel to meetings, and that is only when the meal is not provided at the meeting or by the hosting meeting organization. We get no meals paid for during regular sessions or special sessions. Another misconception commonly referred to in some emails is that farmers get free crop insurance and receive huge subsidies. We farmers do get subsidies from the federal government through the farm bill, usually when there is a widespread crop disaster, weather event, or low prices brought on by things out of our control such as federal tariffs or other congressional action. Let me assure you, I still pay a huge premium for my crop insurance for my small farm even after the subsidies. Another misconception is that the farm bill is mostly for farmers. More money in the farm bill goes to people in cities and heavily populated states like NY and CA than to rural states like ND. Why? To get a farm bill passed through congress, the large states insist they get a giant cut. So, the meal subsidies that schools get from the federal government pass through the ND Dept. of Public Instruction from USDA. They also get commodities such as chicken nuggets, processed foods like peanut butter, etc. Peanut farmers in Georgia benefit from that more than ND farmers. Most people probably don't know that food stamps (SNAP) and the Women, Infant, and Children program (WIC) are paid for from the farm bill too.

The special session was called for one main purpose. ND, through the One Big Beautiful Bill, was granted nearly $5 billion dollars for rural health care to be received over the next 5 years. We got that done, I think, in great form without any big controversy. More to come soon on this.

The following is an open letter on the internet from ND Senator Boehm of western ND. I'm not sure when he sent it out or even to whom he wrote it, but I will say, I don't always agree with him on every issue. However, on this issue, the potential Constitutional measure on universal "FREE school meals" being circulated for signatures now, I agree with him 100%. Our local papers may not have room to print it here, and if not, I urge you to do an internet search for him and read the article. Sen. Myrdal indicated she thought it was a good piece as well.

I oppose a constitutional measure. Why constitutionalizing universal school meals would be a Serious Mistake

Q: During debate, there was talk of putting universal school meals into the North Dakota Constitution. Why do you oppose that?

A: Because constitutions are meant to establish foundational principles and limits on government, not to lock specific spending programs into place permanently.

Embedding a universal meal program in the constitution would remove flexibility, fiscal discipline, and legislative oversight—regardless of future economic conditions.

Q: What's the practical problem with putting this in the constitution?

A: A constitutional mandate means:

• The program must be funded every budget cycle

• Costs cannot be adjusted easily if revenues decline

• Lawmakers lose the ability to scale, reform, or pause the program

• Taxpayers become legally obligated to fund it—even in a recession

That is not responsible governance; it is fiscal handcuffing. Also, the Legacy fund is for the future. Alaska had similar fund it was at 120 billion and they raided it to give every Alaskan a check it has now at around 60 billion and decreasing because of the legislation produced.

Q: Why does flexibility matter so much?

A: North Dakota's economy is highly volatile. More than 51% of state revenue depends on oil extraction and production taxes, which rise and fall with global markets.

Locking a costly, open-ended entitlement into the constitution means the state would have to raise taxes, cut infrastructure, or reduce essential services during downturns—because the obligation cannot be altered.

Q: Aren't constitutions supposed to protect important rights?

A: Yes—but rights and government services are not the same thing. Constitutions protect freedoms and structure government. They are not meant to guarantee specific programs, vendors, or budget line items.

If we begin constitutionalizing social programs, there is no logical stopping point.

Q: What happens if costs rise faster than expected?

A: The legislature would have no meaningful ability to respond. Food prices rise. Enrollment changes. Administrative costs grow. A constitutional mandate would require funding regardless of cost or efficiency.

That exposes taxpayers to unlimited liability with no off-ramp.

Q: How does this differ from statutory law?

A: Statutes allow:

• Adjustments based on need and revenue

• Guardrails against waste and fraud

• Program reform when circumstances change

Constitutional mandates do not.

Q: Why is this especially risky given current conditions?

A: We are already facing:

• Declining oil prices

• Reduced drilling activity

• Heavy reliance on energy revenues

• Major commitments to property tax relief and infrastructure

Adding a constitutionally required entitlement during economic uncertainty is exactly how states lose fiscal stability.

Q: Some say this threat proves the legislature should have passed the bill. How do you respond?

A: Threatening to constitutionalize a policy because the legislature exercised fiscal judgment is not a reason to abandon that judgment.

In fact, it reinforces why restraint is necessary. Good policy is not made under ultimatum.

Q: What principle is really at stake here?

A: The principle that future generations should not be bound by today's politics, and that elected lawmakers must retain the ability to balance compassion with responsibility.

Once something is placed in the constitution, voters and lawmakers lose flexibility—and taxpayers assume permanent risk.

North Dakota's constitution should protect freedoms and define the structure of government—not lock in expensive, open-ended spending programs. Constitutionalizing universal school meals would be a serious and irreversible mistake that removes flexibility, ignores economic reality, and shifts unlimited costs onto future taxpayers. We can care about children and still govern responsibly.

D19 Republican Party endorses: Anderson, Monson, and Myrdal

GRAFTON, N.D. — The District 19 Republican Party held their convention in Grafton and unanimously endorsed Senator Janne Myrdal for State Senate and Representatives David Monson and Karen Anderson for State House. "We're proud to endorse these proven conservative leaders to continue being our area's voice in Bismarck. I know that they're looking forward to the campaign, asking for the support of District 19 voters in North Dakota's June Primary" said Chairman Stegman.

ND Legislative District 19 includes Pembina County, most of Walsh County and the eastern edge of Cavalier County. For more information and a map of D19, visit www.ndgop19.com

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The next step in the effort is to pilot several solutions that tap into the deep reservoirs of trust, demand and opportunity while acknowledging the current
structural risks many newspapers face.

"This is a vital, trusted, necessary industry that people want and need, and we need to find a way collectively forward that benefits society," Wehrman said.

Translating the value

Currently, 24% of households across the state are reached by a newspaper, but looking deeper at county-level data shows much deeper penetration.

Out of 53 counties, 20 have over 75% of households receiving a local newspaper and 15 more show figures of between 50-75%.

Wehrman said those numbers more accurately reflect the impact newspapers have locally, and losing them means communities lose out.

With the $199 million in federal Rural Health Transformation funding being rolled out in the coming year, the importance of local newspapers in communicating what programs are available and how the funding can be used in those communities is crucial, Wehrman said.

People need to understand newspapers are "not a public utility," she said. "These are individual businesses that need the support of their local communities in order to continue doing the work people value so highly."

That disconnect between valuing newspapers and being willing to support them through subscriptions or donations is something that needs to be tackled by both the newspapers themselves and the communities they serve if their survival is to continue.

"People aren't seeing newspapers as a business like they see their hardware store as a business, and they may not be aware of their struggles," said Ellen Huber, rural development director for NDAREC.

"We talk a lot about retaining and growing other kinds of businesses in the state, but I don't think anyone has thrown newspapers in that bucket of important, vital businesses, and ones that are worthy of focusing on, retaining and strengthening and growing," Huber said.

The real value of local newspapers needs to be better communicated to the wider public, participants in the initiative said.

"People think it should be free," Schoch said. "I think people forget about us. People forget about it until they really need us."

Piloting real action

The next step for the initiative is taking forward several pilot projects centered on succession planning, exploring new revenue models, providing print and digital samples for the next generation of news consumers, and developing readymade promotions and content that can be adopted statewide.

Whether those have a deep impact or not depends on securing grant funding to take them forward, Wehrman said.

The hope is that these don't become moonshots, but practical, replicable interventions.

One of the most immediate concerns is the succession planning component, since so many independent publishers are close to retirement age.

Currently, while group-owned newspapers show stronger margins and sustainability, independent, family-owned papers are under pressure from owners nearing retirement, the high cost of printing and distribution, and the heavy reliance on revenue from public notices.

Younger journalists are interested in taking over the reins of these papers, but are constrained by a lack of training and the need for financing to sustain operations, the research found.

"Succession planning is something that we need to offer newspapers, because there is an urgent need for newspapers to change hands," Wehrman said.

Another aspect those involved in the initiative hope can gain traction is to meet demands of news consumers, particularly younger Gen Z and Millennial ones, for both digital and print versions of a newspaper.

Offering samples of those to non-subscribers may be one way to boost circulation.

"I think there's a lot of optimism coming out of this about all of the different ways the data gathered for this can be used, and a lot of excitement about the positive momentum going forward," Huber said.

The North Dakota News Cooperative is a non-profit news organization providing reliable and independent reporting on issues and events that impact the lives of North Dakotans. The organization increases the public's access to quality journalism and advances news literacy across the state. For more information about NDNC or to make a charitable contribution, please visit newscoopnd.org.

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room's interior or behind a sheer curtain in a south- or west-facing window. Water the plant thoroughly until water trickles out the pot's bottom. Empty any water sitting in the saucer to prevent root rot. Allow the top inch or two of soil to dry between waterings. To keep the plant looking sensational and healthy, wipe the dust off the glossy leaves.

In indoor environments, rubber tree has a tendency to grow vertically without branching. Encourage branching by pruning above a node in spring or summer.

Fiddle leaf fig (Ficus lyrata) is another popular ficus. With its violin-shaped leaves, it is like the fashion model of the houseplant world and graces the pages of many interior design magazines. From personal experience, this ficus requires an experienced plant parent. It is tough to grow in low-light environments and is finicky about watering. If you have struggled with fiddle leaf fig, give Ficus Audrey a try.

Ficus Audrey (Ficus benghalensis) is more forgiving than fiddle leaf and less likely to drop its leaves. Audrey's leaves look like a cross between those of rubber tree and fiddle leaf fig. The green oval leaves are shaped more like rubber trees', and the white leaf veins are reminiscent of fiddle leaf fig. While Audrey is more tolerant of watering mistakes, it is best to adhere to the watering advice mentioned for rubber tree.

Finally, a word of advice for those struggling with weeping fig trees mentioned at the beginning of this article. Treat this common houseplant like a drama queen. Understanding that the tree doesn't like change is the not-so-secret formula for being a successful ficus parent. If your tree is happy in its current location, don't move it. Otherwise, it will throw a tantrum and drop its leaves. Try and maintain a consistently warm temperature. In the winter, add a room humidifier to boost humidity, keep your ficus away from drafts and don't over-water.

All kidding aside, you can find a ficus tree to meet your needs and gardening level.