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Appropriations Committee February 4, 2026  
Rough Draft

[AGENCY HEARINGS]

**CLEMENTS:** Welcome.

**DeBOER:** Thank you for having me. Good afternoon, Chair Clements and members of the Appropriations Committee. My name is Wendy DeBoer, W-e-n-d-y D-e-B-o-e-r, and I represent the 10th Legislative District in vibrant northwest Omaha. Today I'm introducing LB982, a request for \$10 million for the Public Service Commission's Broadband bridge-- Bridge Program, a program the Legislature created but, I should say, was really a lot to do with Senator Ricketts. So we need to thank him for it. But the Legislature and Senator Rickett's, then Governor Ricketts, created it in 2021. First, I'll acknowledge the elephant in the room. This is a \$10 million ask in a very tight budget year. I get that. So I am more than willing to discuss the ask amount or to talk about Mr. Walklin's testimony during the Public Service Commission's hearing earlier today. Perhaps the number is we just keep the \$3.9 million that's currently in the program. But regardless of the correct number, I firmly believe in the brogband-- Broadband Bridge Program. Five years, that has not gotten easier to say. I believe this has been one of the wisest investments we have made as a state. Because of our actions in 2021 we have over 5,000 unserved locations and over 11,000 previously underserved locations, giving Nebraskans higher-quality broadband. We know access to the internet is key to the economic success of our rural communities. Quality internet means telehealth becomes possible, online learning is accessible, individuals can build an online presence to sell their crops or products. Simply put, the internet is a necessity, and we cannot turn our back on connecting every Nebraskan if we truly want Nebraska to thrive. The success of the Broadband Bridge Program is part of why I'm here today. The other part is to talk to you about the \$405 million allocated by the federal government for the BEAD Program for our state. We did not appropriate money for the Broadband Bridge Program last year in part because of the \$405 million that was supposed to be coming to us for deployment through the BEAD Program. And we wanted to see where we were at with BEAD before we knew how much we should appropriate to continue the Broadband Bridge Program or if we needed to continue the broadband brand-- Broadband Bridge Program. The hope was high last year. We thought we would be able to provide most Nebraskans with fiber internet, which is the gold standard of internet infrastructure due to its durability, its scalability, and its adaptability. In June,

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however, the federal government issued new guidance which focused on not prioritizing fiber in the BEAD Program. Nebraska's plan was drastically changed. As opposed to investing in fiber, Nebraska will be largely, through that program, subsidizing satellite companies to provide broadband to our unserved areas. And while in a lot of individual cases people have had success with satellite broadband, there's great doubt about the ability of satellite to search-- serve large communities effectively and the service level-- and at the service levels that BEAD requires, and we just know that that's just not as good of a program as actual putting fiber in the ground. If a satellite provider fails to provide service to the standards required by BEAD, they default on their obligation, leaving people in that area without any broadband option, similar to previous federal programs. Most famously, the RDOF program. In Nebraska, we are in the final stages of the BEAD approval process before we can distribute money to BEAD award winners. Due to a variety of factors though, we have not-- we do not have an exact timeline of when that latch-- last stage will be completed, but are hoping by construction season the funds will be released to us. But in the end, the amount that will be deployed to fiber will be about 1/8th of the amount we thought was going to go to fiber deployment before the change in guidance. So here's the thing. We know what works in Nebraska, and that's the Broadband Bridge Program. LB982 continues the commitment made in 2021 to all of Nebraska that we will ensure all Nebraska has access to reliable and high-quality broadband. This is how I think of it. The BEAD was a little bit like, it's like the tortoise and hare story, right? The BEAD, was this very fast, we're going to get everything done all at once, huge kind of influx idea of getting broadband throughout the entire state quickly. The Broadband Bridge is the tortoise. And if we keep putting a little bit in each year, it's not flashy, we don't get it all done at once, but we keep putting a little bit and a little bit and a little bit to build out our broadband, yes, eventually we will get there. And it will take many more years than if we had gotten that full \$400 million for deployment, but eventually we're going to get there, and more and more and more is going to be built out each year. So I know that you guys are facing a very difficult budget year. So my ask ultimately is to keep the program alive. To keep building a little bit here and there with the Broadband Bridge Program because we know it works. That's my ask.

**CLEMENTS:** Senator Spivey.

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**SPIVEY:** Thank you, Chair. Thank you so much, Senator DeBoer, for being here. So I know you are sit on-- you sit on this committee that is intimately more knowledgeable about what's happening with broadband, so I kind of have a two-part question. Last year we did take action around taking some of the funding or giving it back from Bridge, I believe, because the national-- because we said that fed money is what's going to manage that and help with implementation. So any insight that you have on that from the actual implementation side. And then my second kind of part to that question, is I represent an urban district. However, we have issues with broadband as well and folks being able to access internet. And so does this program also look at rural geographies and urban areas that still have the disparity for access?

**DeBOER:** So a lot to unpack there. First of all, the BEAD Program is that federal money that we thought was going to take care of it. And that's the one that we're, we're going to use about an eighth of the money that we thought we were going to use for deployment for deployment of fiber. So it's a much limited amount. I think-- does that answer your first question?

**SPIVEY:** So then, but we gave money back from Bridge.

**DeBOER:** We gave money from Broadband Bridge back to the General Fund or somewhere like that. I can't remember exactly where it went.

**SPIVEY:** Because we thought BEAD was going to do it.

**DeBOER:** But we took it out of Broadband Bridge.

**SPIVEY:** OK.

**DeBOER:** The \$3.9 million that is in there now I understand is because we had active Bridge programs, Broadband Bridge programs that didn't cost-- that ended up costing less. So we left in the money to pay for things that were already in progress But those things that we're already in progress didn't take all the money that we left.

**SPIVEY:** OK, OK.

**DeBOER:** So that's how we ended up with money still in the Broadband Bridge Program, that \$3.9 million. I don't know if that's the right

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number. My staffer said he was listening earlier, and that's the number he gave me.

**CLEMENTS:** That's what was quoted, yes.

**DeBOER:** And he's very good at his job though.. So that's that piece. Now for the urban. So with the BEAD Program, one of the things we did is we tried to identify all of the locations. So it would be a house, a school, whatever, all of the location that were underserved. So the BEAD Program included-- attempted to include all of those. So we have kind of a sense now of where we do and do not have broadband access in Nebraska. If you could get somebody that would qualify for all the different programs and would want to do, because these are grant programs that you have to get a company that would be interested in doing the program, putting together the grant. So, I mean, theoretically, it could happen anywhere in the state, now that we know where there is and isn't. I don't, I don't actually-- I should know, but I don't actually know why we've never done anything in an urban area, and I don't know that there's-- I, I don't know why that is.

**SPIVEY:** Thank you.

**DeBOER:** There may be enough competition. I don't know.

**CLEMENTS:** Excuse me. Senator Armendariz.

**ARMENDARIZ:** Thank you. Thank you, Senator DeBoer for being here. Very simple question. So my first year, we implemented the Broadband Office. And we were taking the funds-- we're going to shift to the Broadband Office from this program?

**DeBOER:** Yes and no.

**ARMENDARIZ:** Because the Broadband Office was now going to go out and do broadband to all these underserved, unserved areas and won't get the BEAD money to do that.

**DeBOER:** You're mostly right, I will quibble with one part of that. We said that the Broadband Office was coming in place to handle the federal funds.

**ARMENDARIZ:** OK.

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**DeBOER:** That would be the BEAD money. We said that the, the state funds would be still through the--

**ARMENDARIZ:** [INAUDIBLE].

**DeBOER:** --the Public Service Commission. And so the Broadband Bridge Program is a state program, so that has always stayed with the Public Services Commission. My understanding when we created the, the Broadband Office was in part to get those funds--

**ARMENDARIZ:** Yeah.

**DeBOER:** --that the broadband brid-- or the BEAD-- they all start with B-- the BEAD Program was coming from the feds. And so they did that work and they have been ushering us through the process to get the BEAD funds. That the idea was that we would get folks in that Broadband Office that had expertise in working with the feds and with getting federal grants, which is kind of a different skill set than what we wanted to have happen with the Public Service Commission and the BEAD-- or the Broadband Bridge Program.

**ARMENDARIZ:** So my question is, do you think it would be financially prudent to do one or the other, not--

**DeBOER:** You mean--

**ARMENDARIZ:** Lead this new agency running--

**DeBOER:** --the Public Service or the Broadband Office? Well, I think the Broadband Office needs to at least be in long enough to get the, the portion of BEAD funding done that we've got, because we haven't started building yet with that. So they at least need to usher us through that process. And then my understanding was that it was always the intent to then kind of close up the Broadband Office and go back to what we were doing as a state. But I'm gonna be gone by then, and that'll be up to you all.

**ARMENDARIZ:** Right. My understanding, when we approved that, we were expecting the \$400 million--

**DeBOER:** Yes.

**ARMENDARIZ:** --and that would support that office, dollar-wise.

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**DeBOER:** Yes.

**ARMENDARIZ:** We're not getting \$400,000, so why are we still--

**DeBOER:** Well, I don't want to say on the record we're not getting it. We're not giving it for deployment, but the federal government is still not sure what they're going to do about the rest of the money that was allocated to states. And they might be able to use it for non-deployment purposes. So I just want to be clear on the record that we are still, as a state, wanting that money, happy to use it for non-deployment purposes, and we have a, a real fighter in Senator Fischer who is fighting to get that money to Nebraska for non-deployment purposes.

**ARMENDARIZ:** So we're still in flux--

**DeBOER:** Right.

**ARMENDARIZ:** --what's happening with everything.

**DeBOER:** Right.

**ARMENDARIZ:** All right, thank you.

**CLEMENTS:** Other questions? Seeing none, we welcome proponents--

**DeBOER:** I'm sorry, Senator Clements.

**CLEMENTS:** --for LB-- pardon?

**DeBOER:** I'm sorry, Senator Clements, I'm not gonna be able to stay to close, so I'm gonna waive my closing. I have to get back to Judiciary.

**CLEMENTS:** All right, thank you. Proponents for LB982. Welcome.

**TIM SCHRAM:** Good afternoon, Chair Clements and members of the committee. My name is Tim Schram, spelled T-i-m S-c-h-r-a-m, I represent the commission's third district. I'm here today on behalf of the commission to provide testimony in support of LB982. We want to thank Senator DeBoer for introducing this bill and for her ongoing commitment to providing advanced telecommunication services to all Nebraskans to close the digital divide. The commission understands that the state is in a difficult budgetary position and that providing funding for this program may be difficult this fiscal year. However, I

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am testifying in support of this bill because the Nebraska Broadband Bridge Program has historically been an excellent investment for Nebraskans. We, we remain committed to the Bridge Program and to continue to improve broadband availability in Nebraska. Between 2021 and 2024, the commission held four grant cycles, and awarded 138 broadband build-out projects. These projects brought 100 by 100 megabits per second fiberoptic service to over 5,000 unserved and more than 11,000 underserved locations. 106 of these projects have been completed and passed speed test. 32 projects are still in construction or working through speed test and reimbursement. We expect the projects from the 2024 cycle to be completed in the summer of this year. Bridge awardees must complete their project buildout in 18 months, unless they're granted extension. We do grant some extensions for good cause but, for the most part, awardees have been able to meet that 18-month deadline. Bridge awardees also have a 15-year performance obligation, which the commission can enforce. In other words, a carry must build out to all locations in the project area in a year and a half, and they must serve all those locations for 15 years after the project is built out. Administrative costs for this program are very low. In four grant cycles, the commission spent on average \$152,700 per year, a 1.62% admin cost. Because of construction timeframes, administration costs do need to be covered for at least two years post-award. Once construction is complete, the staff must review reimbursements to make sure that requirements such as speed testing have been met. Finally, I would mention that we've administered the Bridge Program transparently. We seek public input before every grant cycle and we publicly post all application and challenge materials along with application scoring summaries on our website. The input from providers has helped make the Bridge Program extremely effective and efficient. The Bridge Program has brought tremendous value to Nebraskans. While we understand the funding of the program and the current financial situation might be difficult, the commission stands ready to open additional grant cycles if and when any additional grant funding becomes available. Thank you for your time. I'd be happy to answer any questions.

**CLEMENTS:** You did it in three minutes.

**TIM SCHRAM:** I did.

**CLEMENTS:** Good job, Commissioner. Are there questions, Senator Spivey?

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**TIM SCHRAM:** Yes?

**SPIVEY:** Thank you, Chair. Thank you, Commissioner, for being here. I know you don't represent necessarily my district on the commission, but was hoping if you had any insight to my question for Senator DeBoer just around how the grants are awarded. Again, I live-- I represent an urban area, live in an urban that has a lot of discrepancies and disparities for accessing broadband. And if you're seeing grant applications through these programs that help to address it in urban areas as well as rural, so.

**TIM SCHRAM:** Under the Bridge Program, Senator Spivey, your-- any area in the state of Nebraska, urban or rural, qualifies.

**SPIVEY:** OK.

**TIM SCHRAM:** Now in the scoring, in the scoring process, the unserved areas carry a higher score than underserved areas.

**SPIVEY:** OK.

**TIM SCHRAM:** And speed-wise, unserved is anything that's under 25/3 speed. Underserved is anything from 25/3 to 100/20 speed.

**SPIVEY:** So we would probably be underserved more than unserved.

**TIM SCHRAM:** Correct.

**SPIVEY:** Got it. OK, thank you for that clarity.

**TIM SCHRAM:** But, but, I mean, certainly I'll let carriers know that-- and we do get a request from your district and area.

**SPIVEY:** Yeah, and I actually just had a constituent, I had a town hall, I think right before a session. And I had couple of constituents come and actually bring up the issue of broadband, and I, and connected them to someone on PSC. So I just-- it comes up for me through my constituents, so I just was wondering. So thank you for that clarity.

**TIM SCHRAM:** Certainly. Closing the digital divide is important to all of us.

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**SPIVEY:** Yeah, absolutely.

**CLEMENTS:** Senator Dorn.

**DORN:** Thank you, Senator Clements. Thank you for being here. You said you awarded in '21 to '24, 138 projects, 106 have been completed.

**TIM SCHRAM:** Correct.

**DORN:** So is the funding still there for those?

**TIM SCHRAM:** I believe earlier in appropriat--

**DORN:** And not those, the balance of those, I mean, the, the '24 or whatever.

**TIM SCHRAM:** Well, on '24 we have ongoing projects still going that hopefully we'll have completed this summer. As stated earlier by our executive director in the appropriations and by Senator DeBoer, some of the bids from the ISPs, internet Service providers, came in under their engineers' estimates. So I believe right now that balance is about \$3.9 million of money that, that's there.

**CLEMENTS:** Other questions? Seeing none, thank you for your testimony.

**TIM SCHRAM:** Thank you. Thank you for you time.

**CLEMENTS:** Additional proponents for LB982. Welcome.

**TIP O'NEILL:** Thank you, Chairman Clements, members of the Appropriations Committee. My name is Tip O'Neill, that's spelled T-i-p O-'-N-e-i-l-l, and I'm the president of the Nebraska Telecommunications Association. The NTA represents 20 companies providing broadband and landline telecommunications services in Nebraska. The NTA supports LB982. As some of you may recall, the Broadband Bridge Program was introduced at the request of Governor Ricketts by Senators Friesen and Hilgers in 2021, and was a centerpiece of the Govern-- that Governor's rural revitalization effort. It was considered by the TNT Committee and passed unanimously by the full Legislature. Since 2021, you, you heard the numbers that Chairman Schramm provided you. We've, we've funded almost 18,000 unserved and underserved broadband-serviceable locations. We believe funding for the program should be continued. I'm happy to hear there,

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there may be \$3.9 million left at the end of this fiscal year. There is no reason why that money, which was already appropriated for promoting broadband, particularly in unserved and underserved areas in the state, shouldn't be used for that purpose. Changes in, in federal BEAD funding, in that program, that happened, you know, way after the bill was, was passed by Congress, deleted, first of all, the fiber preference for federal funding. And it eliminated almost 18,000 Nebraska locations served by unlicensed fixed wireless service. And, and we believe that those changes will not be beneficial for Nebraska customers. There will continue to be unserved and underserved holes in rural and urban service areas even after BEAD is deployed. And the NBBB funds will allow us to fill those gaps in future years. Therefore, we support the continuation of funding for the Nebraska Broadband Bridge Program. I'd be happy to answer any questions.

**CLEMENTS:** Senator Armendariz.

**ARMENDARIZ:** Thank you. Thanks for being here. Kind of a tough question. Of your 20 providers, how many of them applied for BEAD?

**TIP O'NEILL:** Well, it depends on when, when you ask, because there were, there were several, many-- I would say about half, almost half of my companies that were pre-approved for BEAD applications. But then the rules changed, and all those locations that got taken off the map then made it very difficult to make a business case for doing a fiber project when it was going to be scored the same way as either a low-earth orbit satellite project or a licensed fixed wireless project. We just weren't competitive at that point. So many, many of our companies did not re-engineer projects because they knew they would, would not be successful.

**ARMENDARIZ:** And I don't know the answer to this. Do you think that that had an impact on, I mean, if they were going to bid on them at the price it would have cost them, do you think that would have maybe pushed the envelope a bit to say, this can't be done for the dollar that you have rearranged rules on--

**TIP O'NEILL:** Well, again--

**ARMENDARIZ:** This is what we actually need?

**TIP O'NEILL:** The federal government then put a cap on the amount of money that it would fund per location. So when, when the areas got

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more sparse because they took those locations off the maps then it made it, the business case, less possible for us in terms of our bidding.

**ARMENDARIZ:** So that after the rules were changed, there really were no better--

**TIP O'NEILL:** Right, there, there are a couple of companies that are here that I'm sure would be much more knowledgeable about it than I, than I am, that I think got maybe one, one project. But, but for the most part, the project areas became more sparse and less conducive to fiber.

**ARMENDARIZ:** Thank you.

**CLEMENTS:** Senator Prokop.

**PROKOP:** Good to see you, Mr. O'Neil. This might be an unfair question, so I'll preface this before I--

**TIP O'NEILL:** This, this is my 45th session.

**PROKOP:** OK. All right.

**TIP O'NEILL:** I'm used to [INAUDIBLE].

**PROKOP:** You're setting the high bar then. OK, incredibly fair question, then. So in your testimony, you mentioned since 2021 put about \$79.6 million in state investments, funded 17,958 unserved and underserved broadband service applications.

**TIP O'NEILL:** Mm-hmm.

**PROKOP:** How many-- under that definition how many locations do we have left and how much would the \$10 million move us in the right direction as far as--

**TIP O'NEILL:** Well--

**PROKOP:** --broadband connected--

**TIP O'NEILL:** We, we don't know yet.

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**PROKOP:** OK.

**TIP O'NEILL:** We don't know.

**PROKOP:** Is that a maps issue or is that a, is that a--

**TIP O'NEILL:** I think it, it, it depends on how the BEAD dollars are deployed, [INAUDIBLE]. And none of those dollars have been deployed yet. You know, we can still make-- you know, we, we can't use state money at this point.

**PROKOP:** Yeah.

**TIP O'NEILL:** I would recommend against using state money for building any locations that are going to be built, built by BEAD.

**PROKOP:** Right.

**TIP O'NEILL:** But there are still locations that are underserved particularly that could be built using Broadband Bridge funds.

**PROKOP:** How far would that \$10 million go then for that particular--

**TIP O'NEILL:** And again, it depends on how sparse, sparse the project is and how much the--

**PROKOP:** The cost per project.

**TIP O'NEILL:** --cost per location is.

**PROKOP:** So unfair. I got it.

**TIP O'NEILL:** That wasn't unfair.

**CLEMENTS:** Any other questions? I want to thank you for 45 years, Mr. Chambers-- I mean, Mr. O'Neill.

**TIP O'NEILL:** No, he was here when I started, believe me.

**CLEMENTS:** Thank you for your testimony.

**TIP O'NEILL:** OK, thank you.

**CLEMENTS:** Next proponent, please.

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**AARON WESCOAT:** Chair Clements and members of the Appropriations Committee, my name's Aaron Westcoat, A-a-r-o-n W-e-s-c-o-a-t, I'm the assistant general manager for Glenwood Telecommunications out of Blue Hill, Nebraska. I'm testifying in support of LB982 on behalf of Glenwood, as well as Nebraska Rural Broadband Alliance, or NRBA. Glenwood and other NRBA members actively participated in the Nebraska broadband program when the Legislature established it in 2021, until it was paused last year. During the first four years of the Bridge Program, the Public Service Commission awarded more than 140 grants through a competitive process. The program was successful in bringing fiber-based projects to services over 18,000 Nebraska households, many of those households in rural areas. Glenwood has been very aggressive in-- as any company in building competitively in areas lacking broadband service. We have used our own capital and U.S. funds, loans, as well as federal, state, and local grants. Under the Bridge Program, Glenwood matched the public funding to reach a total of 713 locations, all lacking broadband service. All 713 of those are in rural areas, all outside of our traditional ILEC territory. Under the bro-- Broadband Bridge Program, Glenwood utilized grant funds to construct fiber broadband infrastructure throughout approximately 75% of Fillmore County. In addition to leveraging public funding, Glenwood invested private equity to match these builds. This commitment allowed us to extend service to three additional communities that previously lacked fiber broadband access, even after our bridge grants have been fully utilized in those areas. The Public Service Commission did an outstanding job running Broadband Bridge Program. Thanks to their leadership, thousands of Nebraska families, especially in rural areas, have now have access to high-speed fiber internet, using up-to-date mapping data. And the Bridge Program has encouraged smart investments, making lasting improvements to the connectivity across the state. The NRBA urges you to advance Senator DeBoer's legislation, but we encourage you to provide more funding. We believe the remaining BEAD funding should go to the Bridge Program, as well as telehealth precision ag programs the commission administers. That concludes our testimony. I'd be happy to take any questions.

**CLEMENTS:** Are there questions? Seeing none, thank you for your testimony.

**AARON WESCOAT:** Thank you.

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**CLEMENTS:** Next proponent, please. Good afternoon.

**EMILY HAXBY:** Good afternoon. My name is Emily Haxby, E-m-i-l-y H-a-x-b-y, I am the vice chair on the Gage County Board of Supervisors. I have worked on challenges across the state for broadband, as well as doing a broadband project in Gage county as well. So have been involved in this for a very long time. I'm here to offer to my support for the bill in allocating more funding to the broadband expansion. I want to be realistic and understand that we are operating in a deficit, and it may not be available in the current budget environment. However, I still believe it is important to go on the record in support of this legislation because broadband is, is important and is not a luxury. It is essential to infrastructure and to our communities and to our future. In light of the recent BEAD funding disaster, programs like this are more important than ever. What we have witnessed with BEAD has been deeply frustrating for local governments, providers and residents who were told help was coming, only to see it fall way short. That experience should not push us away from broad-- broadband investment, it should push us to doing better. If this bill moves forward, I would strongly recommend clarifying the definitions of unserved and underserved. Even with the lack of effort to truly expand broadband with BEAD their attempt will make the maps show many as served. We can, we can and we should have done better. So let's be clear, the definitions-- clear and consistent definitions do matter, not only for fairness but for accountability and success for project delivery. I'd also like to see clear guidance on what infrastructure can be built and what constitutes as overbuilding. Government-funded overbuilding should not be acceptable in any outcome. Government and public dollars must be targeted where the need genuinely exists, not to duplicate existing service where other areas remain disconnected. The Public Service Commission has had its struggles. There have been hiccups along the way in administering the broadband programs. But I would take a hiccup any day over the full-scale failure that we saw with BEAD funding. Finally, I want to emphasize the importance of communication and coordination. Government entities, especially local governments, must be recognized as partners and informed early when issues arise. Too often they are left out of the loop until problems have already evolved. LB176 was a carryover bill from last session that would address this. With this bill, we have an opportunity to learn from past mistakes and reaffirm our commitment to connecting Nebraskans. Even if the funding is not

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available today, the policy direction matters, and it matters to the people of Nebraska. Thank you. And since I have a few seconds left, Senator Spivey, your question with the rural or urban areas, I will tell you when we were challenging the state maps in Nebraska, even in my small village of 200, there was a lot of pro-- a provider there that was claiming service or speeds that were far past what they could do. And that would show a map as served, so it would be-- it would, would prevent them from being funding. So if that's happening in a village of 200, I can't imagine how much that's happening in a larger urban area. And then even brought up the locations on the maps. When those unlicensed fixed wireless--

**CLEMENTS:** You can finish. Go ahead.

**EMILY HAXBY:** When those unlicensed fixed wireless locations disappeared off the map, yes, it made that difficult. Not every state chose to just allow those, those dots to disappear. And Oliver, if you have ask him that question, he can expand on that a lot more. But when, when those dots disappeared, yes, it made it more difficult. My issue with the way that, that funding happened was that every state had to deal with the same rules that we did. And we came in dead last for fiber allocation. We are at 9%. Dead last. Iowa and Kansas, with the say-- same flat and treeless terrain as Nebraska, had about 50% fiber allocation, I think North Dakota was at 93%, Wyoming and Montana, which, which I would argue is, is way more difficult to deploy fiber, two to three times what we had. We, we definitely failed and, and fiber is definitely the best path forward. It's like, like Senator DeBoer said, it's scalable. It's, it's--

**CLEMENTS:** Senator Dorn.

**DORN:** Thank you, Senator Clements. And thank you for being here. Emily is one of my constituents and she has helped me a lot understand broadband and the BEAD and the stuff over the years and she was very instrumental in, I call it, Gage County getting ARPA funds and putting a lot of wire out in Gage County. Update us on about how much of that you did.

**EMILY HAXBY:** Yeah, so we had about \$4 million come into Gage County. And when we looked at that, we had restrictions on what we were able to fund. Broadband was one of them. I had reached out to actually Oliver, so he's been with us from the beginning. But we turned that \$4

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million into a \$13 million project covered about 40% of rural Gage county. So served, I think, a little over 1,000 homes, all rural. And with that is where we discovered the maps were really bad. I mean homes were missing and, and a lot of overreporting was happening across the entire state.

**DORN:** To Senator Spivey's question, you taught me that there might be ten homes there, but if one had broadband, they were all considered to have broadband. That's--

**SHELLY KELLY:** That's the way it had been, yeah. And then, and then it changed with, it's the per-home. And then there were providers that were kind of protecting their area by overreporting, and so then the funding couldn't come into an area.

**CLEMENTS:** There are open doors.

**ARMENDARIZ:** Thank you. Thank you for that explanation. And I may be able to ask the other gentleman that you mentioned, but understanding the Iowa, the Nebraska, they, they have double the population, so have you taken that into consideration with their inflated-- my understanding is they they have some kind of a suit that may be going on in Iowa because of the underfunding of their BEAD as well. What did they do different than us--

**EMILY HAXBY:** They--

**ARMENDARIZ:** --if they did indeed get that much more than us with the same kind of terrain?

**EMILY HAXBY:** I'm just looking at, so like I said, we did our, our project area in Gage County, and it was middle, middle to mid-north area, so covered as much as we could with the \$4 million that we had. We subsidized our project at about \$4,200 per home, per location, so ideally it becomes more populated the closer we get to Lincoln, right? In that area, with the BEAD funding, ended up getting fixed wireless and satellite. And, and so you'd think that it'd be pretty cost-effective as you're getting more populated to, to get fiber, and we didn't even get that there. Now I'm not saying that every place, yes, there's places where you go 10 miles to get to each home, and there are different technology solutions there. The other technology solutions aren't inherently bad. It's just we could have gotten a lot

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farther with \$405 million. I don't know if that answers what you were looking for, but--

**ARMENDARIZ:** I was just looking, what did they do that we didn't?

**EMILY HAXBY:** Different. It might have been just the way the project areas were laid out. I'd have to look closer at, at how they came up with what they did.

**ARMENDARIZ:** All right.

**CLEMENTS:** Senator Prokop.

**PROKOP:** Sorry, just one quick question. Was-- were those dollars when we did have them available for last-mile connection to the home or were they interconnected?

**EMILY HAXBY:** Last mile to the home.

**PROKOP:** [INAUDIBLE].

**EMILY HAXBY:** Yeah, it's been a, it's been a game-changer for a lot of, a lot of people. I have a gal that wasn't-- was struggling with-- she does speech therapy for kids in Scottsbluff, and she serves about 50 kids. And now she can do it from home and she can support her family that stayed home on the farm.

**PROKOP:** Thank you.

**CLEMENTS:** Other questions? I have one question. With your experience, have you shared your experience with Senator Deb Fischer? I understand she's working on this.

**EMILY HAXBY:** Yeah, I have stayed in contact with her aide in her office, Erica. She is well aware of that. And I have a meeting set up with her. At the end of this month, I'll be out in D.C.

**CLEMENTS:** Thank you, I was hoping that you would do that.

**EMILY HAXBY:** Yes, yeah.

**CLEMENTS:** Seeing no other questions, thank you for your testimony.

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**EMILY HAXBY:** Thank you.

**CLEMENTS:** Next proponent for LB982. Thank you everyone for your patience. And we will allow everyone who wants to testify to testify. Welcome and good afternoon.

**BENJAMIN DENNIS:** Good afternoon, Chairperson Clements and members of the Appropriations Committee. My name is Benjamin Dennis, spelled B-e-n-j-a-m-i-n D-e-n-n-i-s, and I am an attorney at Hamilton Telecommunications in Aurora, Nebraska, a Nebraska communications provider since 1901. I am testifying on behalf of the Nebraska Advocacy Group, a group of 10 telecommunications companies providing customers with telephone and broadband service throughout the state. Thank you for the opportunity for me to briefly explain why we support LB982. Today I want to make two points. First, and you've heard a lot of this today, but I wanted to point out a couple other things about why the Broadband Bridge Program has been such an undeniable success in this state and should receive funding from the Legislature as soon as feasibly possible. Commissioner Schram testified about the four grant cycles administered by the commission. Out of the 100-- approximately \$129 million that were-- of projects that were awarded, I wanted to point out that 52 million of those dollars came from companies like ours that matched funds in the, in the grants, and I think that was a good way to bolster those projects which, which were required. During the first bridge cycle, Hamilton was awarded nine grants for fiber projects in rural Nebraska with matches ranging from 50 to 80% of project costs for those. I'm going to touch a little bit on the demand and the competitiveness of bridge cycles. After our success in the first round, we submitted 11 applications in round two and were not awarded any of those grants. They were all though eventually funded in through capital projects fund grants. I've already touched on the 17,000 Nebraska locations that will ultimately receive service through Bridge. The Bridge Program works because it's Nebraska-designed. It requires meaningful match, reflects local realities, and supports fiber buildout. My second point is, now that we know where Nebraska's BEAD dollars are going, as Senator DeBoer testified to, the funding really for Bridge was paused for a year to wait and see what happened in BEAD. But it's now clear that Nebraska still has significant work to close the digital divide. The two BEAD projects awarded to Hamilton, so I worked for a company that received Bridge grants and also BEAD grants, contain 328 locations in Howard County that Hamilton will deploy fiber to. In total, fewer than 1,300

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locations statewide are slated to receive fiber through BEAD. So that's a small number compared to what occurred in Bridge, and there is more need for fiber in this state, clearly. To close, if Nebraska's goal was long-term, scalable broadband infrastructure, there's more work to be done here. It revives a program that is already-- and that is why LB982 is critically important. It revives a program that has already proven it can turn state dollars into real infrastructure, real matching investment and real connections for Nebraskans. The Nebraska Advocacy Group respectfully urges the committee to advance LB982. Thank you for your time, and I'm happy to any questions.

**CLEMENTS:** Thank you. Any questions? Seeing none, thank you for your testimony.

**BENJAMIN DENNIS:** Thank you.

**CLEMENTS:** Next proponent for LB982. Good afternoon.

**CANDACE MEREDITH:** Good afternoon. Is it evening?

**CLEMENTS:** Well, it might be evening now.

**CANDACE MEREDITH:** My stomach is saying evening. My name is Candace Meredith, C-a-n-d-a-c-e M-e-r-e-d-i-t-h, and I'm with the Nebraska Association of County Officials, and here to support of LB982. Again, Emily Haxby really rounded out really well, but I just wanted to mention that, you know, June 6th, 2025 is kind of what-- is the day that I will probably never forget. Again, NACO, along with many other stakeholders, worked alongside the Broadband Office to put together a plan that we felt was really good for Nebraska citizens. But June 6th is when the NTIA BEAD resctruc-- restructuring policy notice came out that states had to basically readjust their BEAD implementation under these revised federal guidance. And so with that, even with these BEAD resources, Nebraska still has a significant work ahead of us to serve our underserved and underserved premises. Especially, you know, you talked about the urban areas, but there are so many locations, especially in those high-cost rural areas that we need to address that might not have been-- had been taken off of the map. So with that, you know, we just really would support the continuation of the Broadband Bridge Program to help our Nebraska communities stay connected. So I'm happy to take any questions.

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**CLEMENTS:** Any questions? Seeing none, thanks you for your testimony.

**CANDACE MEREDITH:** Thank you, Appreciate it.

**CLEMENTS:** Next proponent for LB982. Welcome.

**OLIVER BORCHERS-WILLIAMS:** Thanks. You know, I'm going to go ahead and say it's evening. So good evening, Chair Clements and the Appropriations Committee. My name is Oliver Borchers-Williams that's O-l-i-v-e-r B-o-r-c-h-e-r-s-W-i-l-l-i-a-m-s, and I'm the director of broadband development at the Southeast Nebraska Development District. I'm here today testifying on behalf of the Nebraska Economic Developers Association in support of LB982 and the continuation of the Broadband Bridge program. NEDA represents over 300 professional economic developers and organizations working across our state to promote the steady and balanced growth of Nebraska's economy. We see the Broadband Bridge Program as an invaluable tool in our state's toolkit to foster business growth, economic development and improved community outcomes in all sizes of Nebraska communities. I'm not gonna walk through some of the numbers that I had since those are pretty well covered, but it has touched 60 counties across the state and really widespread, well-distributed impact. We're seeing a lot of dividends already paying out from the prior rounds and the Legislature's investments with that. Our members and some of our organizations constantly give us anecdotes about small businesses that are able to scale up, engage in more e-commerce operations, reinvest into their business after receiving service from some of these networks that have been funded. Local emergency managers are able to do their jobs more efficiently once they have a actually reliable network to connect to. And of course precision ag is always a concern in Nebraska. Fiber is really the backbone infrastructure of a lot of those technologies we're seeing improved yields across our state. You know, I'm not going to belabor the point on BEAD too much, but this, you know, additional investment through LB982 would kind of help patch, excuse me, two cracks that we see forming in connectivity across the state after that program kind of concluded. First one being, and this was touched on, the unlicensed fixed wireless locations. When the federal agency, NTIA, moved the goal posts on what they actually considered to be service, they required states to consider unlicensed fixed wireless instead of just licensed. And our particular approach to that resulted in the removal of about 7,500 locations. And that was about 25% of our original total just wiped off

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the board. We don't necessarily know if those are served up to state standards with what's set in state statute and under the Bridge Program. So, the challenge process that we have in place through Bridge will let us determine if they are or if they need additional service. There's also the issue of satellite. We awarded about 4,800, 5,000 locations to Starlink and Amazon Leo. One of those companies has just requested a waiver of a deployment milestone from the FCC, and the second one is sending out contract riders to all the states that gave it BEAD awards, requesting essentially complete modification of the standards that they agreed to uphold. So we're not necessarily confident in the long-term viability of some of these connectivity solutions, but we are strongly confident in the Bridge Program, and we support LB982 for its continuation.

**CLEMENTS:** Very good. Are there any questions? Seeing none, thank you for your testimony.

**OLIVER BORCHERS-WILLIAMS:** Thanks.

**CLEMENTS:** Next proponent for LB982. Anyone else here as a proponent? Seeing none, anyone here testifying in opposition of LB982? Seeing none, anyone here in the neutral capacity? Seeing none, we have-- senator waived closing, but we have comments for the record. Proponents, 5. Opponents, zero. Neutral, zero. That will conclude the hearing for LB982, and we'll next open up for LB1218. And just a minute while the room clears.

**Speaker 11:** Chairs all along that. This is great. I love them to your appropriations committee. I love this room. This our old egg hearing room right here. What bill was it? You shouldn't have seen it earlier. No, Ike experience. They've gotten rid of some stuff going. It used to be a lot more crowded. You gotta do some TVs. You're down to five. Do you ever use these TVs?

**CLEMENTS:** Oh, we can use it. Yeah, we, you know, we got spreadsheets and numbers, like you can't believe on these, it's wonderful. It's like Geek City in here, isn't it?

**Speaker 11:** You have to be special to be on this committee.

**BRANDT:** Are we ready to go?

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**CLEMENTS:** We're ready to open the hearing for LB1218. Welcome, Senator Brandt.

**BRANDT:** Well, good afternoon Chairman Clements and members of the Appropriations Committee. I'm Senator Tom Brandt, T-o-m B-r-a-n-d-t, I represent Legislative District 32: Fillmore, Thayer, Jefferson, Saline, and southwestern Lancaster Counties. I am here today to introduce LB1218, which is an appropriation to the County Bridge Match Program. The County Bridge Match Program has been a lifeline for counties across Nebraska by helping them replace and repair bridges that are structurally deficient. These bridges are a critical part of our transportation system, connecting communities, supporting agriculture and ensuring people can travel safely on county roads every day. Many counties simply do not have the financial capacity to take on major bridge projects on their own. Bridge replacements are expensive and, for rural counties in particular, a single project can overwhelm a local budget. The County Bridge Match Program gives counties a practical, predictable way to address serious infrastructure needs that would otherwise be delayed or go unmet, putting public safety and local economies at risk. LB1218 requires the NDOT County Bridge Match Working Group to award at least \$4 million to applicants each fiscal year, ensuring counties can rely on the program as they plan and prioritize needed for each projects. To fund this program there would have to be a transfer of funds from the NDOT Roads Operation Cash Fund to the Transportation Infrastructure Bank Fund specifically for the County Bridge Match Program. That is just one idea we have to fund this, but we are open to any and all possibilities. Without the County Bridge Match Program, counties would have little choice but to rely more heavily on local property taxes to fund these repairs and replacements. This program helps counties address critical infrastructure needs while reducing pressure on property taxpayers. I'd also like to add, yes, it would increase local property taxes, but quite often when a bridge washes out, and it's a half million dollars or a million dollars, or 2 million dollars, we close the road. And we close road until that county can budget those funds, and that might not be next year. And that means the mailman, the school bus, the people that farm or live on that road are driving around three, four, five, six miles, and it's a terrible inconvenience. Some of this is structural to Nebraska and what our county boards can do, and I know Senator Dorn served a, a long time on Gage County and maybe some of you others did that too. But this is

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really the Achilles heel of rural Nebraska, our bridges. And not just rural Nebraska. I believe the engineer for Lancaster County, our third most populous county, or second, will be coming to testify on this. And I consider her an expert on this subject. So with that, I would take any questions that anybody might have.

**CLEMENTS:** Senator Spivey.

**SPIVEY:** Thank you, Chair Clements. Thank you, Senator Brandt, for being here. This is like not my wheelhouse, so I don't know if this is an appropriate question. But I feel like with roads and things, we bond them. Like you bond them and it just happens. So can you just help me better understand like why you wouldn't bond a road and it goes at that political subdivision versus this?

**BRANDT:** I know there's several county commissioners going to testify, and I'm going to let them answer that question.

**SPIVEY:** Please remember, whoever that is.

**BRANDT:** Well, they have remembered, but we do bond roads.

**SPIVEY:** OK.

**BRANDT:** OK? But that is a long-term, we've spent years planning this and getting designs and bonding. And then you get six inches of rain overnight and it washes out a critical bridge somewhere or a structure. That could be a whole different scenario. Most of our counties, the only lifeline they have is the inheritance fund. That kind of functions as our rainy day fund. And I think Senator Dorn can probably speak more to that at some point. So, yeah.

**SPIVEY:** Thank you.

**CLEMENTS:** Senator Armendariz.

**ARMENDARIZ:** Yeah, just one question. Thanks for being here, and thanks for the bill. Is this just for public roads or are there bridges on private [INAUDIBLE]?

**BRANDT:** No, just public. Yeah, any, any private bridges, they're on their own.

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**BRANDT:** OK.

**ARMENDARIZ:** Yeah, we as farmers can figure out how to get, get across things, but they would not be public-safety-qualified.

**CLEMENTS:** Senator Lippincott.

**LIPPINCOTT:** Yes, sir. The fiscal impact is that \$4 million out of cash fun. Is that correct?

**BRANDT:** In a sense. Now, these, I am not familiar with these funds that we're moving operations cash around on. And I did talk to Director Kramer, I believe NDOT is probably going to come out as softly against. She has really done a nice job of keeping this program alive in trying to find money. So this is what the suggestion is today, but if we can find funds somewhere. Traditionally, I think they had eight to \$10 million a year, and we're only asking for four. And the commissioners, when they come up here, can tell you some of the projects that they've worked on in their counties. And this is a match program. I think the county has to put up 55% and the state puts up 45%, or it's the other way around. He says it's other way round, I'll go with that. But you're not talking-- maybe it's kind of a grant lottery system where maybe you have 100 bridges apply for this and a committee picks them, and quite generally they'll go to different counties than they did the year before and it could be anywhere from 10, 12, 15 bridges will, will get funding for this and a lot of those roads stay closed.

**CLEMENTS:** Senator Dover.

**DOVER:** I was going to ask you for the time frame of that, but it's just ongoing. It never ends, right?

**BRANDT:** I think when Engineer Dingman gets up here, county engineer for Lancaster, I do see reports from Lancaster County. She is a certified bridge inspector, and she can tell you how many are structurally deficient in Lancaster county, which I consider very well covered. And then maybe the county commissioners here can tell what percent is structurally deficient in the other counties. Structurally deficient doesn't necessarily mean they're going to close the bridge. They might put a sign on it until something bad happens.

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**CLEMENTS:** Senator Armendariz.

**BRANDT:** Yeah.

**ARMENDARIZ:** Thanks. Another question. So we were ranked number one in the country for infrastructure, includes roads and bridges. So I think it was U.S. News and World Report last year, 2025.

**BRANDT:** What, what does that ranking mean?

**ARMENDARIZ:** We were number one, the number one state in the country for infrastructure that includes roads and bridges.

**BRANDT:** For the--

**ARMENDARIZ:** We had the best in the county of roads and bridges.

**BRANDT:** OK. And that was probably federal-funded projects, I would guess?

**ARMENDARIZ:** Infrastructure--

**BRANDT:** Yeah.

**ARMENDARIZ:** Number one for infrastructure.

**BRANDT:** If you've got that information, I'd sure like to see it.

**ARMENDARIZ:** OK. Yeah. So I'm-- and probably an engineer, where they're structurally deficient, would probably want to address that. And I just wanted to put that out there for when they come up, they could probably go into detail of at what level and what percentage of our bridges are structurally deficient compared to other states, I guess, and how would we get that ranking compared to the other states.

**BRANDT:** And something that's kind of unique to Nebraska is after the Civil War and they plated the state with the Homestead Act, in eastern Nebraska, we put a road every mile. And a lot of our counties still have a road every mile, and we may not have a person for every two or three miles. So we've got a lot minimum maintenance and dirt roads out there that may have some bridges on that that, you know, we have limited funds in a county. They do their best to address where the trafficked roads are at. But the further west you go in Nebraska, to put this in perspective, I believe it's Grant County has no county

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bridges. Richardson County, which is the same size of county in southeast Nebraska has 450. OK? All the water in the state of Nebraska, which has the most rivers in the United States, flows from Chadron down to Richardson County. And the more water, you have more bridges. And it's, it's not uncommon where I live to have a little county bridge every mile or two. And they don't even count bridges under 20 feet, I believe. And a lot of those they will replace with culverts, if they can.

**CLEMENTS:** Other questions? Senator Strommen.

**STROMMEN:** Just sort of a cheeky question. Would this include the Kingsley Dam bridge?

**BRANDT:** If that's what it takes to get this passed, they can certainly apply--

**STROMMEN:** OK.

**BRANDT:** --with, with my counties. Not a problem.

**CLEMENTS:** Do you have any invited testifiers?

**BRANDT:** I think I would just ask how many people are going to testify. So it looks like I've got about eight invited testifiers.

**CLEMENTS:** All right.

**BRANDT:** Was anybody testifying against this?

**CLEMENTS:** Looks like about nine, that's--

**BRANDT:** Just NDOT is the only one against. So yeah, you've got seven. Three minutes, I would say. Two minutes.

**CLEMENTS:** Yeah, three minutes.

**BRANDT:** OK. Yeah.

**CLEMENTS:** I see Mr. Cannon from NACO. I invite you to come next. And I think after you, NDOT, we'd like to hear from. Then we'll have whoever else.

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**JON CANNON:** OK.

**CLEMENTS:** Welcome.

**JON CANNON:** Chairman Clements, members of the Appropriations Committee, my name is Jon Cannon, J-o-n C-a-n-n-o-n, I am the Executive Director of the Nebraska Association of County Officials, also known as NACO, here to testify in support of LB1218. Senator Brandt's intro was terrific. We thank him for bringing this bill, and I, I certainly can't really add or detract from, from anything that he said. What I can tell you is that this is one of the best programs that the counties have. When I first got to NACO, my predecessor Larry Dix had said this is one of best things that we have for direct property tax relief, and I'll get into that in just a moment. Not a huge ask, relatively, \$4 million. We had been accustomed to about, I think, \$5 million when this program was first created back in 2016 as part of the Transportation Innovation Act. I believe Senator-- then State Senator Fischer had worked on this. To give you an idea of, of how far back we're going. And frankly, again, not a huge ask relatively speaking. It's \$4 million compared to the \$5 million that we have, we have been accustomed to receiving. That original bill had talked about a, a promise of up to \$40 million. And, and the screenshot from the Nebraska Department of Transportation will show you that \$34 million has been awarded. And so, frankly, I think the extra \$6 million that we're still waiting on would, would certainly be able to fund that. You guys have heard me say this before any time I have visited with you. Counties are responsible for a number of things that people really, really care about. And among them are roads, bridges, law enforcement, jails, courts, and elections. People are not asking county board members for less of any of those things. And there's a reason that I mentioned roads and bridges first, and that's because for a number of counties, the majority of counties in the state, that is probably their number one expense. I can share with you that small counties, those counties that have less than 5,000 people, they spend 31% of their overall property tax ask on roads and bridges or public infrastructure. Medium counties, it's 30%. Large counties, its 14%. And just those numbers alone tell you that replacing those structurally-deficient bridges across our state is direct property tax relief for the citizens of Nebraska. That's something that we are certainly in favor of. I know that we've had a lot of conversations in the body regarding the ways of relieving the property tax burden on our, on our landowners or property owners across the state. This is

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one of-- simply one of the best programs and the most bang for the buck that the state can, can do to further that. So with that, I'm happy to take any questions you might have.

**CLEMENTS:** Are there questions? I had a couple. Bonding was mentioned. Is it prohibited to bond for a bridge project?

**JON CANNON:** Well, it's going to depend. And I see that Gage County Supervisor Emily Haxby and Jefferson County Commissioner Mark Shoenrock are here. Those are, those are decisions that the board has to make. Sometimes if you've got a bridge that's washed out, you have an immediate need, frankly, from a public safety standpoint, you're looking at an ambulance or 911 taking more time to get there because the, the bridge is, is gone. They'll frequently dip into their inheritance tax fund if they have that immediate need. If it's something where, you know, this is over a minimum maintenance road or along min-- minimum maintenance road or something where they can wait, then yeah, they can, they can certainly bond for that. But, again, the, the thing about bonding that, and you're more aware of this than I am, Senator, is that you are going to pay more in nominal dollars. Although the immediate cost in the here and now for that property tax year will be lower, but you're going to stretch it out over a longer period of time. So that's a decision that county boards have to make every day.

**CLEMENTS:** And there was a 55%, 45% mention, but do you know who pays what?

**JON CANNON:** Yeah, the 55% is from the state, the 45% is from the counties.

**CLEMENTS:** OK. And do you think it would be fair to describe this as a funded non-mandate program?

**JON CANNON:** No, sir. I think it is a funded mandate program. The counties are tasked with maintaining the roads and bridges that are part of the county highway system. So it, it's mandated, but this is a source of funding for those.

**CLEMENTS:** Very good. All right. Thank you for that.

**JON CANNON:** Yes, sir.

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**CLEMENTS:** Any other questions? Seeing none, I'd like to hear from the Department of Transportation.

**JON CANNON:** Thank you very much.

**CLEMENTS:** Good evening. Welcome back.

**VICKI KRAMER:** Thank you, Senator, and good evening. I thought maybe I'd get to be the last testifier of the day, maybe soon. So good, good afternoon, Chairman Clements and members of the Appropriations Committee. My name is Vicki Kramer, V-i-c-k-i K-r-a-m-e-r, and I'm the director of the Nebraska Department of Transportation. I'm here today to share the department's concerns regarding LB1218, which changes provisions relating to the County Bridge Match Program. The County Bridge Match Program is administered by NDOT in partnership with the County Bridge Match Working Group for the purpose of funding and repair and replacement of deficient bridges in the county road system, originally created under the Transportation Innovation Act of 2016. NDOT is supportive of the intent of the program and is actively seeking options to better the condition of local infrastructure, as Senator Brandt said. An example of this is the creation of the Infrastructure Development Investment Program proposed in LB1126 this year. The department's concern and reason for opposition testimony is centered on the use of highway user revenue dedicated to NDOT being redirected to fund county-owned infrastructure. This is especially concerning as we see a growing delta between NDOT's revenue and the estimated cost to address the needs of the state highway system as the department shared with the committee in December. As you'll remember, LB1030 in 2024 transferred \$8 million to-- from the Roads Operations Cash Fund to the program across two years. NDOT voiced concern but ultimately supported this one-time investment under the premise of LB1030 closing the unfunded gap between authorization and appropriation from the original 20-- 2016 legislation. However, should this program continue as supported by this bill, we believe another dedicated revenue source needs to be identified that does not take from the department's limited state revenue to be used for county infrastructure. What we ask is this. As NDOT works to support the obligation and construction of the existing appropriation and 46 bridges that have yet to be built, we will work with the County Bridge Match Working Group, NACO, stakeholders, and Senator Brandt to continue to refine long-term solutions to improving local infrastructure. Much has changed since we created the program 10 years

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ago. The 2021 federal highway bill dedicated nearly \$59 million for off-system bridges, which enabled around \$37 million of federal aid to be spent in recent years to improve structures across Nebraska communities. Additionally, NDOT's infrastructure hub has supported roughly \$50 million in discretionary requests and rewards to improve off-system structures. We are deep into reauthorization of the federal highway bill to where we expect changes to how funds are allocated. Let us get through this and set up a governing structure that leverages economies of scale and financing options beyond what County Bridge Match currently does. Our goal is to improve local infrastructure without negatively impacting our planned projects. For context, the recently awarded improvements to Highway 136 in the Beatrice area came with a cost of roughly \$6 million, and a typical roundabout to improve safety is between \$3 and \$5 million. So cash-flowing-- so cash-flowing the program will impact the safety of the highway system. As such, we respectfully request that the committee not advance LB1218. Be happy to answer any questions.

**CLEMENTS:** Senator Spivey.

**SPIVEY:** Thank you, Chair Clements. Thank you so much for being here, director. This is probably more of a, a bias question because we've been in conversation with like Highway 30 in my district and just all of the complexities with that. And so if I hear you correctly and looking at what you have provided, the Nebraska Infrastructure Hub, you all have prioritized projects, I see that project on here. That's what that money is currently going towards are these things that are listed here in this way. And if we redirect funds, then there will be a gap in these things that you've already decided and prioritized, is that correct?

**VICKI KRAMER:** So let me clarify a bit. So what you're looking at is the Infrastructure Hub and projects that our team has said could compete for federal discretionary grants. And so yes, we do believe in those projects and we are readying them whether they get discretionary grant or not. But they're not a direct correlation to what we're prioritizing in respect to each project, because each one of those federal discretionary programs is unique. And so I wanted you to have an idea of what the Infrastructure Hub is prepping because there are some county bridge bundles on that list, so you could see that. But to answer your question, on the project that we've been working towards,

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you know, the \$10 million price tag that we say that we're going to need for that project, it would directly impact that.

**SPIVEY:** Thank you.

**CLEMENTS:** Senator Prokop.

**PROKOP:** Thank you, Mr. Chairman. And thanks, thanks again for being here, doc-- Director Kramer. Almost called you Dr. Kramer.

**VICKI KRAMER:** Well, I mean.

**PROKOP:** You and I had some overlap in the Department of Transportation. This, this County Bridge program is near and dear to my heart. I think I was around kind of the first cycle of grants when it was going out. But two questions. One is the Roads Operations Cash Fund, that's the pay-for for this right now?

**VICKI KRAMER:** Yes.

**PROKOP:** What is that actually used for? So if this was to be directed to this, what is it not going for then?

**VICKI KRAMER:** So it's our-- essentially our holding cash, right? So it is where we program projects out of. So it's a direct correlation, as I said with Senator Spivey, projects that are going to be funded on the state highway system. So as you know, the highway allocation is where would ask for it to come from because that would be the typical county or city infrastructure fund, as opposed to the roads apps, which is highway funds.

**PROKOP:** And then just a second, a second part to that. So in his opening, Senator Brandt graciously offered to look at a different source of funding if there is available. Do you have any suggestions on where that might be or what could be used?

**VICKI KRAMER:** So yes, I would go with the highway allocation piece. We also have looked at the federal funds swap and essentially taking it from the bridge program off the top. And so there's about \$13 million in that. I truly feel that it's not just money. And we've had this conversation with NACO as well as with Senator Brandt, is we still have 46 bridges that are left to be built. We've obligated 41.1-- \$40.1 million, so we have, we have closed the gap in terms of funding,

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but we still have 46 bridges that are left to be built. These bridges are getting more and more difficult, and we fully understand that. We need to build off of what we found with the infrastructure hub in order to do an economies of scale where we're bundling these bridges across counties. If you look at what Missouri and Montana and other states have done, they've done programmatic approaches to these where you can use alternative delivery and alternative financing in order to really get after these different solutions. Missouri did over 2-- over 800 bridges over three years they were able to improve. And right now we're still looking at close-- it's 1,991 as of today, deficient bridges. And so we do have a problem. I don't disagree with that. But taking from highway funds at a time where counties do still get money, and I, I get it, it's more and more difficult to save that, those dollars up, but if we're gonna do that, let's look at the federal fund swap so that we can better administer the \$13 million as opposed to a county getting \$200,000 every year and having to save that across 15 years. I get it, that doesn't work either. We've gotta change the governance structure, which is why we proposed LB1126, so that we can look at, if we were to borrow from the federal government, you mentioned bonding, Senator, if we were to use Rural TIFIA in a bundled bridge approach through what we are proposing with LB1126, we would be able to borrow at half the treasury rates up to \$100 million in order to bundle these projects. And so what we'd ask for is take the revenue that is generated with the intent of county infrastructure as opposed to the intent of highway.

**CLEMENTS:** Other questions?

**DORN:** Well, I did. But Senator Prokop kind of asked mine. A couple of things. Number one is, I thank the department and thank you for carrying on the Bridge Match Program. As most people know, I was a county board member. Got to take a part in part of this and as we bid those out and everything. For the county's perspective, very, very successful program, and thank you very much. You also know that going forward, you have to prioritize these, and the cost is going up. And the bridges you build, the state builds, they're not, I call it, a million or two million dollar ones. They're proposing one in Gage County right now that a lot of federal funding is going to come from the [INAUDIBLE]. That's a five to six million dollar redo of that bridge. So thank you for all you do.

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**VICKI KRAMER:** Thank you, Senator. And as you said, they are getting-- structures are getting more and more expensive. So being thoughtful for where this comes from is, is just going to be more difficult, which is why we've really tried to tackle the governance structure and laid out how we can do this in partnership with NACO. Once LB1126 gets through, I think the counties will understand how we build upon the Infrastructure Hub to take some of these bundles forward and actually deliver. And the department's a big fan of County Bridge Match, too. We just can't keep moving forward with unfunded mandates.

**DORN:** From when I sat on the county, and I know visiting with the board members, it's thank you very much for having that. And I thank the state for having that program because it's replaced a lot of bridges with culverts and replaced a lot of smaller bridges that unfortunately are structures of-- many have aged out. They were built a hundred years ago and intended to last 50 years, and now they're 100 years old.

**VICKI KRAMER:** And that's what the Missouri program did. They replaced, like I said, they replaced over 800 bridges, and they looked for those efficiencies to where they could use culverts or they leveraged three different designs in order to programmatically address the problem over three years.

**DORN:** Thank you.

**CLEMENTS:** Other questions? Seeing none. Thank you.

**VICKI KRAMER:** Thank you, Senator.

**CLEMENTS:** I just realized that I brought an opponent in. But how about a proponent now? Proponent, please.

**MARK SCHOENROCK:** Good afternoon, Chairman Clements and members of the Appropriations Committee. My name is Mark Schoenrock, M-a-r-k S-c-h-o-e-n-r-o-c-k. I have to apologize a little bit for my voice. We had a long hearing earlier this morning, and I'm sure some of you can relate to that. I am a Jefferson County commissioner currently serving as vice chairman now, many years serving as chairman of our county board. I'm also a past southeast director of the Nebraska Association of County Officials, representing 17 counties of southeast Nebraska. I would like to thank Senator Brandt for introducing LB1218 to provide essential funding for our Nebraska County Bridge Match Program for

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2026 and 2027. Two of the highest priorities for government are public safety and infrastructure to serve our citizens. Nebraska state government, working with counties across Nebraska, to replace these bridges and creates farm-to-market routes, school routes, creates local construction work and improves the lives of our fellow Nebraskans. Placing funding into the program allows our fellow citizens to get to school, get to work and we get goods to market in a safe way on a reliable route. Restoring our rural bridges restores basic needs and resiliency to our rural communities. In Jefferson County, I am responsible for 405 bridges, 405 Bridges in a 25-square-mile area, in 935 miles of road. In my nearly 11 years as a Jefferson County commissioner, Jefferson County has been a leader in Nebraska in this program, thanks to the efforts and the dedication of our county highway department and our county engineer. We have replaced 10 worn-out and unsafe bridges at a cost of \$2.4 million. We have received 52% of that total, or \$1.3 million, in funding assistance from the Nebraska County Bridge Match program. We would not have been able to afford most of those projects within our county budget, or we would have had to significantly raise our tax asking of county citizens if it were not for this program. The other option, of course, as Senator Spivey has alluded to, is to bond. We have done that some, but then we pay a lot more in the long run if we bond a project. Additionally, we have partnered with Saline, Seward, and Fillmore Counties on four of the applications for a total of 22 projects. And the citizens in those counties have benefited from this program as well. I strongly urge you to support LB1218 for the funding of this essential program for 2026 and 2027. And regarding Director Kramer, I would also like to thank her. Our county government has a great relationship with the Nebraska Department of Transportation. We partner with, with them on a number of different projects, one of which I'm very proud is an almost \$13 million project. We're going to be getting a new road. We're working with NDOT and, thanks to Senator Fischer, we have the funding to complete that road. I want to thank each of you here tonight for your service to the citizens of Nebraska as state senators, and I'd be happy to address any questions that you might have.

**CLEMENTS:** Senator Dover.

**DOVER:** Where do you keep your inheritance tax funds, what account do you put those in? Is there a certain name you use for that?

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**MARK SCHOENROCK:** Senator Dover, we primarily, in Jefferson County, we primarily use inheritance tax funds for two purposes. Number one, we'll sometimes use it to help keep down our levy, that's one purpose that we use it for. But we also have used it for large infrastructure-type projects in the county, some of which has been some of our roads and our bridges in my 11 years as a county commissioner. That for us accounts for about 10% of our county budget on an average year. You know, it varies depending on how much inheritance tax you get in per year. But on average, it's about 10% of our county budget.

**DOVER:** Do those, do those funds get mingled with any other funds?

**MARK SCHOENROCK:** No, it's a separate fund.

**DOVER:** How much-- what's it balancing at?

**MARK SCHOENROCK:** Say that again?

**DOVER:** What's the current balance in Jefferson County [INAUDIBLE]?

**MARK SCHOENROCK:** Right now my inheritance fund is about \$2 million.

**DOVER:** Thank you.

**MARK SCHOENROCK:** Yeah, but \$2 million goes pretty quick.

**DOVER:** No, I, I understand, I just was wondering. I know-- I understand the dynamics, [INAUDIBLE] county commissioner.

**MARK SCHOENROCK:** Sure. When you have 405 bridges and 935 miles of road to maintain, and we're pretty, pretty comparable to most-- you know, I used to be the NACO Southeast director, 17 counties. We have a lot of bridges and a lot of roads. For like Senator Brandt said, the further west you go, you don't have that concern quite so much. But for us counties in southeast Nebraska, that's a very significant concern.

**DOVER:** I used to drive out to our farm, which isn't too far outside of town, and I'd go across five bridges.

**MARK SCHOENROCK:** I'm sure.

**DOVER:** 13 miles.

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**MARK SCHOENROCK:** Yep, in Madison County. Yeah, I'm sure.

**DOVER:** Thank you.

**CLEMENTS:** Any other questions? Seeing none, thank you for your testimony.

**MARK SCHOENROCK:** Thank you.

**CLEMENTS:** Next proponent for LB1218.

**SCOTT HUPPERT:** Good afternoon, Chairman Clements and members of the Appropriation Committee. My name is Scott Huppert, S-c-o-t-t H-u-p-p-e-r-t. I'm here in support of LB1218. I'm here to give you a kind of a visual, once the handouts get out there, of how many really bridges that are in the state of Nebraska. Once you guys all get them, I'll show you, and you're going to go, there's a lot. I'm going to through the handouts to show you there's 15,412 bridges in the state of the Nebraska. Once you get them all, I'll show you on your deal here on the first page. That's a lot of bridges. It almost blacks it all completely out. Just to give you a visual of all the bridges, on the second page, it's the total of the structure-- structural-deficient bridges that you have in the state of Nebraska. You have over 1,280 bridges that's on the poor list. You still have a fair list that are probably not on this, but this is the structural-deficient bridges. You have over 1,280 bridges as of 2025. That's, that's a lot of bridges that have to be taken care of. As you go to the third page, this is number of bridges that the program has taken care of and, and the counties have divvied in and, and you guys have helped out between 2017 and 2024. And there's 15 more bridges that need to be put on here that was appropriated this year. But it's working. There's 385 bridges that it's helped out. It's helped them repair or replace them bridges. So the, the program is working, and we're putting it forward and getting it out there. And as you go back to the last page, you'll see where a lot of these bridges are they're weight-restricted, a lot. And if you look, look through that, there's almost half of the bridges that are out there that there's something wrong with them. That's why they're weight-limited and stuff, and we need to take care of them. There's got to be something else there. As you know that the budget cuts that the counties have to take and stuff like that, the high cost of building these bridges, especially in my county, I have 322 bridges. I find-- try to find different ways to

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keep these bridges going. I live right in the middle of farming, and I have a lot of, lot of trucks go over my bridges. And I see firsthand of the destruction. These bridges just don't heal on them own. We got to put the money out there. Just for me keeping up with the repairs of my county, it's ridiculous. So I'm all for I hope you guys keep this program going. It helps my county and a whole bunch of the counties in the state of Nebraska.

**CLEMENTS:** Thank you. Senator Dover.

**DOVER:** I don't know if you know this, but how often, I mean, I didn't even know what the current state would be, but how often does someone break a bridge? [INAUDIBLE]?

**SCOTT HUPPERT:** They do, and a lot of them, they don't know they're breaking them. I mean, you have cracks where you get some of these trucks. As you know, in farming, there is-- you can go over 1,000 pounds more illegal. And if you watch, you go check them. I do bridge inspector, and I go inspect a lot of these bridges that I know that there's a lot of trucks going over. You see a lot cracks, a lot movement, and a lot that stuff. So you got to put your attention to those bridges to get them repaired or get them back up so they're stable.

**DOVER:** So you're something that very rarely does anyone go to a bridge and actually break [INAUDIBLE].

**SCOTT HUPPERT:** They do. You'll get some, yes. They won't fall through. I have not had where I come from in Richardson County, yes, we had quite a few of them fall through. Fall-- tractors, grain trucks, fertilizer trucks went and they ended up on the bottom. So it, it, it's this program is working. I just-- it helps out to what funding we can't keep up with the destruction that's happening to these bridges, so.

**DOVER:** Thank you.

**CLEMENTS:** Other questions? Seeing none, thank you for your testimony.

**SCOTT HUPPERT:** You bet. Thanks, guys.

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**CLEMENTS:** Thank you for this map. It was helpful. Next proponent. Good evening.

**STEVE RAGOSS:** Evening. Good evening, members of the Appropriations Committee. My name is Steve Regoss, spelled S-t-e-v-e R-a-g-o-s-s. I am with Van Kirk Brothers Contracting in Sutton, Nebraska, and I'm testifying on behalf of the Associated General Contractors, Nebraska Chapter, in support of LB1218. AGC is a trade association of highway contractors who perform highway, bridge and municipal utility infrastructure work across the state. For many years our association has recognized the growing need to assist counties with funding, repair and replacement of aging bridges. In 2014, the Legislature's Transportation Committee conducted an interim study on county bridges that included site tours hosted by our association in both Otoe and Cuming Counties. Subsequent legislation in 2016 resulted in the County Bridge Match Program. The program has successfully reduced the number of structurally-deficient county bridges and provided critical support to local governments. LB1218 builds on that success by providing continued support for the County Bridge Match Program so counties can keep their highest-priority bridge projects moving forward. As an infrastructure contractor, the County Bridge Match Program is very important to my company. Over the past eight years we've worked in over 25% of the counties in Nebraska. The Bridge Match Program helps to keep our company economically viable and, in addition, when we're working in counties or municipalities, it also helps to promote economic viability for those communities and counties. Nebraska's bridges are essential for getting people to work, bringing families to and from school, and moving products to and from markets. For these reasons, AGC supports LB1218 and urges the committee to advance the bill. I thank you all for your time, and I'd be happy to take any questions.

**CLEMENTS:** Any questions? Senator Prokop.

**PROKOP:** Thank you for being here. I appreciate your insights on this. Just a quick question on, I think it was maybe Commissioner Schoenrock mentioned this, but as a, as a contractor and just talking about kind of economies of scales-- of scale, so when you bid this, I'm not sure if you do it at the contractor level or you do to the con-- or at the, at a county level, the bundling of projects.

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**STEVE RAGOSS:** Mm-hmm.

**PROKOP:** Is that something so when you take it to bid to, to the counties, like can you just talk about how that works? So to stretch of dollars, you know, we've got limited dollars on this, how do you do that from a contractor standpoint?

**STEVE RAGOSS:** Well, bundling of the projects is helpful because it-- if the projects are within, even within the county, they, it provides continuous work for us. And like I said, as long as there's work, it keeps my company viable, but also provides viability for the families directly employed by us.

**PROKOP:** And you typically initiate that as part of your bid, or does the county say I want this kind of--

**STEVE RAGOSS:** Usually the county would be the one that would bundle the projects. And, and some of the counties that are represented here we've worked for and, and you know, one project is good, but two or three projects are always better.

**PROKOP:** Sure.

**CLEMENTS:** Senator Dover.

**DOVER:** Have you ever picked up any extra work when you're, say you're in a county doing some work [INAUDIBLE] this bridge for us, too? [INAUDIBLE]?

**STEVE RAGOSS:** Sometimes it's talked about, but rarely with budgets and whatnot and the, the scope and magnitude of projects. I can't say that I've ever had that happen. I mean, it might result in, you know, back in 2019 with the flooding, if we were replacing a bridge, you know, we may go a mile away and fix a washout. But something like doing one bridge and then moving to the next one, that, that doesn't happen very often.

**DOVER:** All right, thank you.

**CLEMENTS:** Other questions? Seeing none, thank you for your testimony.

**STEVE RAGOSS:** Thank you.

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**CLEMENTS:** Next proponent, please. Good evening and welcome back.

**EMILY HAXBY:** Good evening, I guess it's now, right? My name is Emily Haxby, E-m-i-l-y, Haxby is H-a-x-b-y, I am the vice chair on the Gage County Board of Supervisors. I sit on the road and bridge committee for my board. And then also, fortunately, unfortunately, I've been kind of appointed as the grant writer for Gage County, so have been working on a lot of different projects trying to get funding in so that we can make these projects happen. I'm here to support the bill that provides the funding for the County Bridge Match Program. This funding program allows counties to apply for a match of up to 55% with a cap of \$500,000. I can't overstate how critical that support has become. Bridge projects are not getting any cheaper. In fact, they are becoming more expensive every single year. A box culvert replacement can cost anywhere from \$300,000 to \$800,000, small bridge replacements are \$1 to \$3 million. Large bridges or bigger rivers are \$6 to \$7 million. These costs place an enormous strain on county budgets especially when we're facing increasing pressure on keeping our levies low. I want to also recognize NDOT for the work they've done administering this program with the 93 counties across the state. It's not an easy task. NDOT works hard to make these difficult decisions and has supported this program for a long time. They understand how much program-- this program means to counties and have been very supportive. And their support also shows through the Infrastructure Hub, and I want to thank them for that. She had mentioned that there is a bundle in there of county bridges, and we are one of those. And the Infrastructure Hub has been awesome for helping counties, because those federal grants that are available to help us are extremely difficult to navigate. When I first started, I wrote one that had three bridges and a couple roads, and it took me four months to write that application. And the Infrastructure Hub has been helping modify and kind of answer those. And the BCA is about the bane of my existence. So they've got people there that, that definitely help with that, too. It is a-- budgets are always tight. And I truly appreciate all the help that they have done in operating, despite those constraints. I also hope this bill can serve as a starting point as maybe a broader conversation. Rather than continuing to make difficult choices year after year with limited funding, maybe we can work together to find a larger funding pool that would make a bigger impact. If this-- this program does work, it does matter, and I ask

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for your continued support, not just for the bill, but for the counties that rely on it. Thank you.

**CLEMENTS:** Are there questions? Seeing none, thank you for your testimony.

**EMILY HAXBY:** Thank you.

**CLEMENTS:** Next proponent, please. Good evening.

**GARY CONNOT:** Good evening, Chairman Clements and members of the Appropriations Committee. My name is Gary Connot, spelled G-a-r-y C-o-n-n-o-t, I am the Holt County highway superintendent. I am here today on behalf of my office to testify in support of LB1218. In 2024, I was appointed by Governor Pillen to the County Bridge Match Program Working Group. As a member of the group, I reviewed 42 requests for bridge funding in 2024 and 2025. Reading through these and rating these requests was a harder task than I anticipated. The stories told in these requests felt like my story and the story of many of my peers who are here today. Many of us have worked hard to maintain and keep bridges open as long as we can. However, it is impossible and at some point. The only responsible answer is to replace the bridge. Over the past nine years, Holt County has received County Bridge Match Program funding for three bridges. Holt county provided at least 45% of the funding, funding match to receive the funds from the NDOT. Without this funding, the county would not have been able to replace these bridges, which are important to farmers, emergency responders, and getting our kids to school. Programs like CBMP impact daily lives of Nebraskans and the economic well-being of the communities they reside in. The CBMP has proven itself to be an effective and efficient collaborative solution between the state and counties. I urge you to support the continuation of this program by allocating funding to the program for another year. This will allow counties to continue to make progress on our aging bridge inventory. Thank you for your dedication to this program in the past and thank you for you time today. Do you have any questions for me?

**CLEMENTS:** Any questions? Seeing none, thank you for your testimony.

**GARY CONNOT:** Thank you.

**CLEMENTS:** Next testifier, proponent.

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**DON ROBB:** Good evening.

**CLEMENTS:** Good evening.

**DON ROBB:** I'm Don Robb, D-o-n R-o-b-b, I am Hall County's highway superintendent and public works director. Wanted to just throw a few numbers out, give you a idea of what we're dealing with, same as all the other counties. We have 630 miles of gravel road, and we spend about a half million dollars on just gravel. We have 184 miles of asphalt, and right now that's costing us about \$280,000 a mile for an overlay. Then we step into the bridges as we're trying to also fund. We have 180 bridges. Last-- most of the bridges we've worked, we just bid one a while back and finished it, runs anywhere from \$850,000 to \$2 million. We have a bridge over the Platte River south of the South Locust interchange, and just to redeck it and work on a concrete girder, they're ballparking it's going to cost about \$2 million just for the redeck and that. We also have another 247 county structures that run us anywhere from \$250,000 to \$400,000 for boxes. We're very pleased with the bid-- bridge program. If we can, on the bridges, we downsize boxes to save money. There's quite a few that were in the bridge program this year that are box culverts and everything. That's one of the things we're just, all the counties are struggling to try to get money, and this is one of projects this LB1218 helps tremendously.

**CLEMENTS:** Thank you. Are there any questions? Thank you.

**DON ROBB:** Thank you.

**CLEMENTS:** You're giving us a good idea of what the challenges are. I appreciate that.

**DON ROBB:** Thank you.

**CLEMENTS:** Next proponent. Good evening.

**PAM DINGMAN:** Good evening. Senator Clements, I thought I might never get here. I just want everyone who is a highway superintendent or responsible for a county engineering program to raise their hand, because not all of us testified today. And so just so you guys have an idea of who we are. My name is Pam Dingman, spelled P-a-m D-i-n-g-m-a-n, I am a Lancaster County engineer. I am here today on behalf of my office, the Lancaster County Commission, and the

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Professional Engineers Coalition to testify in support of LB1218. In 2024, I was appointed by Governor Pillen to the County Bridge Match Program Working Group. This bill extends the very popular County Bridge Match Program, which sunset last year after nine years. The CBMP was an extremely successful partnership between Nebraska Department of Transportation and Nebraska counties for the shared goal of improving county bridges. This program helped many counties replace bridges across Nebraska. The program has reimbursed counties up to \$500,000 per project. This enabled Lancaster County to replace nine bridges over this period. In addition, the program encouraged us to find innovative ways to construct bridges, team with other counties, and even remove bridges from the system. There are many more county bridges that are eligible for funding that are still waiting to be improved. Last year, 42 counties applied for funding from the program. Every year of the program, there have been more requests for bridge funding than bridges awarded funding. Working with counties to replace these bridges improves farm-to-market routes, school-- and school routes, and creates local construction work. And quite frankly, encourages small business and employs people in our counties. It improves the lives of all Nebraskans. Nebraskan counties own 11,218 bridges of the 15,274 bridges. If, if you're like me or maybe Senator Clements, you're gonna count that number. That's 73%, Senator Clemets. 73% of the bridges are owned by counties in Nebraska. Of that, 891 of these bridges are rated poor. 133 of these bridge are closed. Poor and closed bridges continue to impact the lives of everyday Nebraskans trying to farm, trying to get to work, or just to school or even to the doctor. We need to continue to work together to replace county bridges that are rated poor. In closing, I would like to point out that the creation of the County Bridge Match Program Working Group has allowed counties, along with the division, the bridge division of NDOT, to work together to mutually understand our goals. We do have different goals and we have different types of bridges. Our bridges are smaller. We have opportunities to work with smaller companies to build these bridges, to hopefully build more contractor base in Nebraska, which also benefits all of us. And with that, since it's late, I would just like to thank you for your time today. I know it's late for all of us, and ask if you have any questions.

**CLEMENTS:** Any questions?

**PROKOP:** Do I dare?

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**CLEMENTS:** Senator Prokop.

**PROKOP:** Thank you, Mr. Chairman. It's good to, good to see you. Thank you for being here.

**PAM DINGMAN:** Thank you.

**PROKOP:** Just wanted to ask about your experiences being on the County Bridge Match Working Group and selections of bridges and how that works. What do you, what do you take into account? Because, you know, with the demand being what it is and the funding being what is, what gets prioritization? How does that, how does that work?

**PAM DINGMAN:** Well, sometimes you have to be careful what you ask for, right? And so when we came back two years ago for additional funding, we asked if we could have, the counties could have a seat at the table on the selection committee. And so Mr. Connot and I were appointed by the Governor to sit on that committee. And, and here's the thing, sometimes you've got to be careful what ask for because we have peers in the audience and, you know, your peers might want to know why their bridge wasn't selected. Which is, is always one of those awkward conversations. We did develop a program, we did develop-- that people submitted competitively. By the way, I think it's good for counties to get used to competing for funding because I think that's the new mode that we're all going to get funding, whether it be from NDOT or from the Federal Highway Administration, we're going to have to get into this groove. And so we decided to allow people to write a five-pound-- five-page narrative on their bridge and why it was important. And I also, again, be careful what you ask for because 42 packages, there is NDOT staff in the room that also reviewed those packages, and it was well over 100 pages of reading. And every bridge story is compelling as you read across Nebraska. And what it really brought to my mind is, I knew the dots on the map, I knew the dots on the map. But when the dots on the map have a story, it just increased my level of passion for our bridge needs and our infrastructure needs across the state.

**PROKOP:** Just a quick follow-up to that. Was there anything as you were, as you're doing that, does anything get prioritization as far as, I mean, loads carried, access-- you know, Senator Brandt talked about access to farm-to-market and schools, emergency, stuff like--

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**PAM DINGMAN:** So I can speak as to how I chose to rate, and then I'll also add that the bridge division provided a ton of data. And they have an employee in the bridge division named Kent Miller, who is like the god of all spreadsheets. And so he sent all this stuff to us in a very usable package so that we were able to rate these on number of, you know, ADT is what we call it, average daily traffic. So we did look at ADT and a number of other things in order to, to find the best way to focus this funding. And then, Senator Clements, I'll also disclose that, you know, Senator Prokop is probably asking me questions because I am his constituent. He's just, you know, just trying to build a bond.

**PROKOP:** I appreciate you admitting that.

**CLEMENTS:** Are there other questions? Seeing none, thank you for your testimony. Additional proponents? Seeing none, is anyone else here in opposition? Anyone wishing to testify in the neutral capacity? Seeing none, Senator Brandt, you're welcome to close.

**BRANDT:** When I look around this table, I see Senator Prokop is from Crete and Senator Strommen is from somewhere out west. He's got the whole panel. Dorn's next to me in Gage County. Dover is up there at, at Madison. And Lippincott is from Hall County. And you're from Cass County. And the rest of them are from Omaha. And the reason they're--

**ARMENDARIZ:** There's a county there.

**BRANDT:** Douglas County, OK. And the reason I bring that up is when we're talking about this, I can't help but think of some of them little wood bridges that I continually cross with equipment that's too big for that bridge, because we have no choice. We have farms that are landlocked inside these bridges. We have, you know, no choice but to go over these bridges. And I know every one of you is thinking of some county bridge in that same situation that needs some help. This is property tax relief, and I know Senator Clements has worked for years to get rid of the Inheritance Fund. But I think you can see the other side of this. I was kind of shocked to hear that my county actually had \$2 million in there, but it's kind of cyclical on who died the year before. Because I have other counties that hit that number and then next year they have like \$50,000. So that's really the only excess funding any of the counties that I represent, Fillmore, Thayer, Jefferson and Saline, really have to address this problem. I don't

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know what else to add to what, what these guys have told you. They live it every day. And if we can just find some funding source for this, it would be terrific. Any amount of money just to get us by until we can get, you know, times get a little better around here. But yeah, and we'll definitely work with Director Kramer, I think she's got some ideas on this. But if you guys have some ideas on this, we're certainly open to it, so.

**CLEMENTS:** Are there any questions? That was going to be my question. Director Kramer said a term, she used the term "fed funds swap."

**BRANDT:** Right.

**CLEMENTS:** Yeah, we'd, we'd appreciate it if you, if you have any other ideas to bring those to us as we're deliberating.

**BRANDT:** Yes, yes. We will certainly do that.

**CLEMENTS:** Any other questions? Seeing none, thank you.

**BRANDT:** Thank you.

**CLEMENTS:** Thank you for--

**BRANDT:** Thank you for staying late. Yep.

**CLEMENTS:** --your patience. With that, we have online comments to report. Proponents, 3. Opponents, zero. Neutral, zero. That concludes the hearing for LB1218, and that concludes our hearings for today.