



Testimony on *Assembly Bill 912* before the

JOINT FINANCE COMMITTEE

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Ed White

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Good morning Co-Chairs Darling and Nygren and members of the Committee. Thank you for the opportunity to testify today on Assembly Bill 912.

My name is Ed White. I currently serve as the executive director of the Sauk County Development Corporation. I am also the immediate past president of the Wisconsin Economic Development Association.

WEDA is a statewide association representing roughly 450 public and private sector economic development professionals. We are dedicated to advancing economic prosperity in Wisconsin and providing our members with the necessary tools to encourage business expansion and promote private investment.

As you might imagine, rural economic development is unique with its own set of challenges and opportunities. Unfortunately, the challenges often outweigh the opportunities. Most of them revolve around a diminishing workforce and a fading infrastructure. The population in rural areas of the state is often declining or stagnant, and the foundation needed for economic growth, such as broadband access and available housing, is typically inadequate.

It's not all negative. Progress has been made and rural communities do possess certain features that businesses and young professionals are looking for, including accessible real estate, natural amenities, and a good quality of life. However, there is no question the economic performance of rural Wisconsin is lagging and that it's time to rethink our approach to rural economic development.

Assembly Bill 912 is a strong sign that we are indeed rethinking our approach. WEDA appreciates Governor Walker's leadership on the issue and would like to thank the Legislature for considering the proposal. The legislation creates a strong framework for a new Rural Economic Development Fund, which is extremely exciting. However, the legislation lacks specific details, which creates uncertainty for rural economic development organizations and the businesses in their communities.

While WEDA supports the bill in concept, our members are hesitant to back legislation that fails to provide a well-defined path to advance rural economic development. We have great confidence in the leadership of WEDC Secretary Mark Hogan and the ability of his agency to

administer the proposed fund, but a statewide approach to rural economic development without direct involvement at the local level is unlikely to be successful.

With that in mind, I would urge the committee to consider and ultimately approve Assembly Amendment 1, which would provide rural regions with some of the necessary tools and funding to develop and execute effective strategies to promote business growth, attract private investment, and strengthen the workforce. I would like to thank Representative Travis Tranel for his work on the amendment and for seeking input from economic development professionals.

Rural economic development is a complex issue with few clear solutions. Each rural area of the state is unique, with distinct strengths and weaknesses. Assembly Amendment 1 to AB 912 recognizes that reality by providing rural communities with the ability to address their specific challenges. The bill as amended would not only strengthen the partnership between rural communities and the state, it would also provide local control and allow rural communities to bear greater responsibility for their economic success.

In closing, I would urge you to support AB 912 as amended by Assembly Amendment 1 to help all regions of Wisconsin share in the benefits of economic growth. Thank you for your time and consideration. I would be happy to answer any questions.