

2011 SENATE GOVERNMENT AND VETERANS AFFAIRS

SB 2337

# 2011 SENATE STANDING COMMITTEE MINUTES

Senate Government and Veteran's Affairs Committee  
Missouri River Room, State Capitol

SB 2337  
February 3, 2011  
13908

Conference Committee

Committee Clerk Signature *Kate O'Neil*

## Explanation or reason for introduction of bill/resolution:

To provide for a governor's initiative for North Dakota's lasting harvest

## Minutes:

Testimony Attached

Chairman Dever opened the public hearing on SB 2337, roll was taken and all members were present.

Senator Taylor: District 7. See attached testimony #1.

**Vice Chairman Sorvaag:** On the fiscal note it show \$163,000 in the first biennium but the bill requires contracting with a second party in the 2nd biennium but there is no numbers put to that, do you know why?

**Senator Taylor:** If you do all your meetings and finding in the first biennium that maybe the second biennium might be more in-house in the governor's office with existing resources and preparing proposals. I wouldn't anticipate it being beyond this cost.

**Senator Berry:** In looking at the bill the language is very general, is this based on anything?

**Senator Taylor:** It was motivated by the editorials that we have read in the Grand Forks Herald. I don't know if there is value to getting to every exact detail and I think that a consultant would lead you through that process.

**Chairman Dever:** How do I get passed my immediate concern that the legislature is passing a governor's initiative?

**Senator Taylor:** We could look at it as an interim legislative study if we want to keep it in the legislative branch. The governor will come up with proposals that will be brought to the legislature and ultimately we have the power to approve.

Christopher and we brought them together to assist us with that project. When we did that we also decided to try and tap into the brain power here to figure out where the dynamics of the future are going. With that group you get a nice cross section of what is happening nationally and internationally. The genesis of Senator Taylor's idea is very good and I think that as we look at it there are some resources that we can bring to the table. The second piece that I would bring to that we are looking to bring things to the state level that we have already brought to the city level with Mandan. It was an \$115,000 project and the private sector supplied \$80,000 the rest came from the city, school board and park board to come up with the rest of that money. I think as we look at this project we have some really unique opportunities. We have been talking about generational leadership, economies come and go and sometimes you get the situation that we are in now where the money is flowing. At the state level I think that we are in need for some generational leadership and we are working on developing that concept more.

**Senator Cook:** Do you think that the governor might get this resolution and consider that he had never thought of doing a plan like this?

**Kelvin Hullet:** We have already talked to him about utilizing the resources to have some good conversation about the state.

**Senator Cook:** Do you think that the governor might ask why we are reaching into his job?

**Kelvin Hullet:** That very well may be possible. I think that the genesis of the idea is very good

**Chairman Dever:** It seems to me that issue 2000 was initiated by the private sector.

**Kelvin Hullet:** As I look at it, it is not necessarily one branch telling another branch what to do this is much more of a collaborative effort. I think that type of environment exists today. I will also tell you that our investors said that you can invent all the plans you want but how do you implement them?

**Chairman Dever:** So do you think that the bill provides for flexibility to include the private sector in the way that it should be?

**Kelvin Hullet:** I haven't looked that deep into the specific language but certainly that is something that we want to make sure the private sector is included in.

**Andy Peterson:** North Dakota Chamber of Commerce President and CEO. North Dakota has an exciting opportunity and we are no longer being seen as just an agriculture state. We are making great strides in the area of manufacturing. At the end of the day I think that our government as a whole could benefit from working together. People in the private sector have

their skin in the game, let me encourage widening the circle and including more people. I think that we would be supportive of this. Every time we plan

**Senator Berry:** Was there any thought in going to the governor directly?

**Andy Peterson:** We have been starting to discuss with the Governor already and we are chatting with him and we want to be respectful as we go.

**Chairman Dever:** Better by government or private sector?

**Andy Peterson:** I will always lean towards the private sector. While sometimes a group may be better able to handle but if we can work together it would be beneficial to all of us.

**Senator Taylor:** Yes there has been a conversation with the governor and I think that he will be neutral and not opposed. I think that there would be hesitance if there was someone in their position to endorse fully.

**Kyla Pulvermacher:** NDFU Support 2337. We think that this is a great way to bring the minds of North Dakota together to talk about the future of the state.

There was no further discussion on SB 2337 so Chairman Dever closed the public hearing on the bill.

# 2011 SENATE STANDING COMMITTEE MINUTES

Senate Government and Veteran's Affairs Committee  
Missouri River Room, State Capitol

SB 2337  
February 4, 2011  
14060

Conference Committee

Committee Clerk Signature *Kate Dewey*

**Explanation or reason for introduction of bill/resolution:**

To provide for a governor's initiative for North Dakota's lasting harvest

**Minutes:**

*No testimony*

A motion was made for a do not pass recommendation was made by Senator Cook with a second by Vice Chairman Sorvaag, there was no further discussion, roll was taken and the motion passed 5-1-1. Chairman Dever then closed the floor on committee work.

# FISCAL NOTE

Requested by Legislative Council  
01/26/2011

Bill/Resolution No.: SB 2337

**1A. State fiscal effect:** *Identify the state fiscal effect and the fiscal effect on agency appropriations compared to funding levels and appropriations anticipated under current law.*

	2009-2011 Biennium		2011-2013 Biennium		2013-2015 Biennium	
	General Fund	Other Funds	General Fund	Other Funds	General Fund	Other Funds
Revenues						
Expenditures			\$163,410			
Appropriations						

**1B. County, city, and school district fiscal effect:** *Identify the fiscal effect on the appropriate political subdivision.*

2009-2011 Biennium			2011-2013 Biennium			2013-2015 Biennium		
Counties	Cities	School Districts	Counties	Cities	School Districts	Counties	Cities	School Districts

**2A. Bill and fiscal impact summary:** *Provide a brief summary of the measure, including description of the provisions having fiscal impact (limited to 300 characters).*

This bill requires the governor to contract with a consultant and conduct at least 30 public meetings to develop a 20-year strategic plan for the state.

**B. Fiscal impact sections:** *Identify and provide a brief description of the sections of the measure which have fiscal impact. Include any assumptions and comments relevant to the analysis.*

It is estimated that this bill will require an appropriation of \$163,410, calculated as follows:

Consultant costs:

Assistance in arranging and conducting public meetings and preparation of strategic plan = \$150,000

Travel costs for 1 consultant and 2 staff to conduct 30 public meetings:

Mileage @ \$.51 per mile for average of 300 miles per trip for 30 trips = \$4,590

Lodging @ \$73 per night = \$6,570

Meals @ \$25 per day = \$2,250

**3. State fiscal effect detail:** *For information shown under state fiscal effect in 1A, please:*

**A. Revenues:** *Explain the revenue amounts. Provide detail, when appropriate, for each revenue type and fund affected and any amounts included in the executive budget.*

**B. Expenditures:** *Explain the expenditure amounts. Provide detail, when appropriate, for each agency, line*

*item, and fund affected and the number of FTE positions affected.*

- C. **Appropriations:** *Explain the appropriation amounts. Provide detail, when appropriate, for each agency and fund affected. Explain the relationship between the amounts shown for expenditures and appropriations. Indicate whether the appropriation is also included in the executive budget or relates to a continuing appropriation.*

<b>Name:</b>	Joe Morrissette	<b>Agency:</b>	OMB
<b>Phone Number:</b>	328-1024	<b>Date Prepared:</b>	01/28/2011

Date: 2-4-11  
 Roll Call Vote #: 4

**2011 SENATE STANDING COMMITTEE ROLL CALL VOTES  
 BILL/RESOLUTION NO.**

Senate Government and Veteran's Affairs Committee

Check here for Conference Committee

Legislative Council Amendment Number \_\_\_\_\_

Action Taken Do Not Pass

Motion Made By Cook Seconded By Sorvaag

Senator	Yes	No	Senator	Yes	No
Chairman Dever	X		Senator Marcellais	X	
Vice Chairman Sorvaag	X		Senator Nelson		X
Senator Barry					
Senator Cook	X				
Senator Schaible	X				

Total (Yes) 5 No 1

Absent 1

Floor Assignment Cook

If the vote is on an amendment, briefly indicate intent:



**REPORT OF STANDING COMMITTEE**

**SB 2337: Government and Veterans Affairs Committee (Sen. Dever, Chairman) recommends DO NOT PASS and BE REREFERRED to the Appropriations Committee (5 YEAS, 1 NAYS, 1 ABSENT AND NOT VOTING). SB 2337 was rereferred to the Appropriations Committee.**

2011 TESTIMONY

SB 2337

**SB 2337: North Dakota's Lasting Harvest**

***A Bill for an Act to Provide for a Governor's Initiative for North Dakota's Lasting Harvest***

**Senator Ryan M. Taylor**  
**Testimony Materials**

**Vision 2000 and the Growing North Dakota Program**  
*History & Background Information*

**Grand Forks Herald Editorial**  
For N.D., a Commission on the Future  
*April 4, 2010*

**Dickinson Press Editorial**  
Keeping up with oil cache  
*May 02, 2010*

**Grand Forks Herald Editorial**  
Plan now to ensure bright future for N.D.  
*May 5, 2010*

**Grand Forks Herald Editorial**  
Oil boom shows need for Commission on the Future  
*August 29, 2010*

## Vision 2000 and the Growing North Dakota Program

In the late 1980s key individuals and organizations in North Dakota began to formally evaluate the future direction of the state. In January 1988 a group entitled the North Dakota 2000 Committee was formed by the Greater North Dakota Association, a statewide chamber of commerce, to explore the state's economy and examine its options for the future. SRI International Consultants was hired to assist the committee. Town hall meetings were held in 40 of the state's communities to help North Dakotans explore the challenge before them and to begin thinking about their choices. Over 6,700 people attended these meetings. The program recognized that the state's economy was at risk of declining further than it had already been. After nearly two years and thousands of hours of research, interviews, and meetings, the committee released its first report in 1990, entitled Vision 2000 Kick-Off Report. The report began with the following:

"Last October, the North Dakota 2000 Committee went out and asked if North Dakota was dying. The people of North Dakota said yes, it would, unless we change the way we look at things" (North Dakota 2000 Committee 1990).

The report cited the following facts to demonstrate the state's fragility:

- North Dakota was the only state in the United States to have fewer residents in 1990 than it did in 1930.
- Per capita income had steadily declined since 1975 and was 15 percent below the national average in 1990.
- Young people were leaving the state. In the three years leading up to the report, 17,000 people between the ages of 22 to 25 had left North Dakota.

The Vision 2000 program recognized that North Dakota's main income generators were agriculture and energy. It asserted that the state needed to specialize and focus its economy around four economic sectors:

1. Advanced agriculture and food processing
2. Energy by-product development
3. Export services and tourism
4. Advanced manufacturing.

The report stressed the need to move away from producing basic products for traditional markets and move towards producing higher value-added products designed for new, more specialized markets. The Vision 2000 committee also noted that the state's "single biggest obstacle" for moving forward was "people with negative mind sets" (North Dakota 2000 Committee, 1993).

Funded by a grant from several foundations, the state sent a delegation to participate in a planning session led by the Council of State Policy and Planning Agencies in 1990. The purpose of the session was to establish a structure for the state's economic development process. The delegation was chaired by the state governor's chief of staff and included the executive vice president of the North Dakota Association of Rural Electric and Telephone Cooperatives (NDAREC), legislative and farm group leaders, and the president of the Bank of North Dakota. Bill Patrie, the state's economic development director (and soon to be the director of the NDAREC's rural development program) was also a participant. The delegation helped to devise a legislative strategy for economic development, and Bill Patrie contracted with the government to prepare a legislative draft. Governor Sinner then appointed a committee of 34 to implement a comprehensive economic development legislative program (Patrie).

In 1991 the state legislature passed a \$21 million budget for economic development for the period 1991 to 1993. This amount was four times larger than any previous development budget (Department of Economic Development & Finance). The funds came from earnings of the state-owned Bank of North Dakota. This economic development legislative package was a set of policies and programs that was known as "Growing North Dakota" (Patrie).

### **Growing North Dakota**

The program set five specific numeric goals for the state for the year 2000:



**GROWING**  
North Dakota

1. Have a state population of 700,000 people with equal population growth across all regions. In 1990, the population of North Dakota was 638,800, compared to 652,717 in 1980 (Coon and Leistriz).
2. Double the number of manufacturing jobs, from 16,400 to 32,800.
3. Maintain the current number of full-time farming operations.
4. Increase new exported service jobs by 8,000.
5. Have a per capita income equal to the national average.

In 1996, North Dakota Commissioner of Agriculture Sarah Vogel noted that a major overall theme of the Growing North Dakota initiative was to increase the farmers' share of the food dollar (Vogel, October 1996).

The 1991 legislation did the following:

- Replaced the state Economic Development Commission into the Department of Economic Development & Finance
- Created Technology Transfer, Inc., a state-chartered corporation that provides funds for commercialization of new technology
- Created the North Dakota Future Fund, which provides equity and debt investment for primary sector businesses
- Implemented the Cooperative Marketing Grants category of funding available through APUC. The first grant to be awarded under this category from APUC went to the Dakota Growers Pasta Company (Vogel November 1996)
- Implemented the agriculture partnership in assisting community expansion (AgPACE) fund, a program that helps to buy down the interest rate for on farm businesses and to foster non-traditional agriculture
- Provided funding for the partnership in assisting community expansion (PACE), a program through which the Bank of North Dakota participates with local communities to reduce interest rates on business loans for primary sector businesses
- Provided funding to the Agricultural Mediation Service, a program aimed at providing financial and managerial assistance to existing farmers so that they can remain in business
- Permitted an additional 5 years of property tax exemption for value-added agricultural processing facilities.

In 1993, the state legislature affirmed the Growing North Dakota program for a second time and appropriated approximately \$18.5 million for the 1993-1995 biennium (North Dakota Legislative Council). In 1995, the Growing North Dakota program was affirmed for yet a third time.

### **Enhancement to Growing North Dakota**

In 1997, Governor Schafer announced a program, entitled

"Enhancement to Growing North Dakota", to conduct more specific market analysis in order to identify North Dakota's best opportunities for growth and diversification. The Department of Economic Development & Finance hired two consulting firms, Arthur Andersen LLP and Flour Daniel Consulting, to help with the project. These firms conducted a competitive assessment of the state. Enhancement to Growing North



**FORGING A LINK  
TO THE FUTURE**  
ENHANCEMENT TO GROWING NORTH DAKOTA

Dakota aims to create stronger linkages between government, education, and the private sector so that the state is better prepared to shape its economic future.

The Vision 2000 initiative has been credited with helping to create a more positive, entrepreneurial attitude in the state, and the Growing North Dakota legislative program has been key to the state's technical and financial support of cooperative activity (Springer).

[References](#)

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## **Vision 2000 & Growing North Dakota References and useful sources of information**

**Coon, R.C. and F.L. Leistriz.** 1998. The state of North Dakota: Economic, demographic, public service, and fiscal conditions. A presentation of selected indicators. North Dakota State University: Department of Agricultural Economics. Fargo, North Dakota.

**North Dakota Department of Economic Development & Finance web site.** Online. Retrieved June 22, 1999. <http://www.growingnd.com> .

**North Dakota Legislative Council staff.** 1998. Economic development functions in North Dakota: Background memorandum. Prepared for the Commerce and Agriculture Committee. Online. Retrieved August 11, 1999. <http://www.state.nd.us/memos/99231.html> .

**North Dakota 2000 Committee.** 1990. Vision 2000 Kick-Off Report: An Eight-Point action agenda for building a new North Dakota. Fargo, North Dakota. **North Dakota 2000 Committee.** 1993. The North Dakota Vision 2000 Report: A Progress Report. Fargo, North Dakota.

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**Vogel, S.** October 1996. Redefining cooperation: The role of cooperatives in emerging agricultural initiatives: The North Dakota experience. Presentation to the American Agricultural Law Association. Seattle, Washington. Online. Retrieved August 11, 1999. <http://www.state.nd.us/agr/testimony/prior%20testimony/test961004.html> .

**Vogel, S.** November 1996. Presentation by N.D. Commissioner of Agriculture Sarah Vogel. Presentation given at the Wisconsin Federation of Cooperatives Annual Meeting. Green Bay, Wisconsin. Online. Retrieved August 11, 1999. <http://www.state.nd.us/agr/testimony/prior%20testimony/test961111.html>.

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**GrandForksHerald.com**

Tom Dennis, Published April 03 2010

## **OUR OPINION: For N.D., a Commission on the Future**

Empty highways. Abandoned homes. Littered floors and overturned desks in the “sagging old schoolhouse” in Gascoyne, N.D., where “a torn page from a textbook flutters in the breeze from a broken window.”

Abandon all hope, ye in North Dakota, suggested “The Emptied Prairie,” a story in National Geographic magazine.

That was then: January 2008, two short years ago.

This is now:

“If current projections hold, North Dakota’s oil production could pass Alaska’s by the end of the decade,” The Wall Street Journal reported in February.

Wha-a-a-t? Alaska?

Alaska, the state with neither a state sales tax nor an individual income tax? The state whose \$40 billion Alaska Permanent Fund lets it send Alaskans annual checks for several thousand dollars?

Believe it, the Journal reported:

“Production has grown so rapidly here, 100 miles south of the Canadian border, that companies had to build a rail line to transport their oil to market, since there wasn’t a big enough pipeline in the state to handle the oil.

“Companies have scrambled to find labor in a state with fewer than a million people. ... Oil-field workers have flooded the western city of Williston, leaving it with a chronic shortage of hotel rooms and making housing scarce. In Dickinson, three hours to the south, a labor shortage has the local McDonald’s offering \$300 signing bonuses.”

And of course, the oil play means North Dakota can claim not only America’s lowest unemployment rate, but also our country’s only state budget surplus.

You’re not the only one whose head is spinning from this sudden and gigantic change of fortune.

And what does it mean? Is North Dakota looking at a lasting boom? If it is, then how can North Dakota best use its newfound revenue to grow the population, improve the business climate and boost the

quality of life?

The state needs a Commission on the Future to find out.

Gov. John Hoeven, the Legislature, the Board of Higher Education and private-sector partners such as the North Dakota Chamber of Commerce should charter a commission to light the way.

The fundamentals have changed, by most accounts. North Dakota — especially western North Dakota — no longer is the same place it was only two or three years. The state's oil, coal and wind-energy abundance promise a future of decent jobs and healthy budgets, for individuals, school systems and universities alike.

If that's true — a very big "if" — then North Dakotans should study and talk about the state's new options. Because the energy boom could change life in North Dakota more powerfully than any other force since statehood.

Texas' history offers a good example.

With the tapping of the Spindletop oil well in 1901, "Texas' economy was wrenched from its rural, agricultural roots and flung headlong into the petroleum and industrial age," the Texas Almanac 2010 reports.

Since then, "oil has profoundly changed the culture of the state, and it continues to affect most Texans' lives in ways that may not be obvious to the casual observer."

The Permanent University Fund in Texas "is one of the largest university endowments in the world. ... Texas public schools have benefited from oil, as well. ... Thousands of Texans have been touched by Texas' black gold through the philanthropy of people who have made fortunes from its discovery, production and processing. ...

"Institutions all over the state in many different fields — health research and hospitals, education, social services, fine arts, and engineering and technology research — have benefited from the wealth and generosity of petroleum millionaires."

There are precious few forces capable of overcoming the "Too Much Mistake," the classic description of North Dakota history as being a long comedown from "too many" towns, churches and schools.

But oil is one. A Commission on the Future should study the issue, because for the first time in a century, the "Too Much Mistake" seems poised to give way to "Building the Good Life in North Dakota."

# THE DICKINSON PRESS

Published May 02 2010

## Press Editorial: Keeping up with oil cache

Rumors and talk that there is much more black gold in North Dakota than realized have swirled and swirled. It seems those rumors are not rumors and may not have been exaggerated to their full potential.

A study released Thursday shows an oil reservoir in western North Dakota holds nearly as much recoverable crude as the Bakken shale formation above it.

Technology could lead to the recovery of about 1.9 billion barrels in the Three Forks-Sanish formation.

The Three Forks is made up of sand and porous rock directly below North Dakota's portion of the Bakken formation, which has been estimated to hold 2.1 billion barrels of recoverable oil.

The new Three Forks projection is based on more than 200 well measurement logs and 85 sets of testimony from technical experts.

This is good news for North Dakota and the country and is a chance to develop our resources, stop independence on foreign oil and create a stable economy, complete with creating hundreds of jobs.

What an economic boost this will be. Along with bringing hundreds of people to this side of the state comes a need for goods and services. We can also hope that more oil produced means lower prices for consumers.

However there is the flip side. Problems are imminent upon tapping into such a gigantic discovery. And to some extent these problems have already sprouted in the region: Lack of housing; safety issues; shortage of employees; road concerns.

Now is a time for the southwestern part of the state to work on comprehensive plans to make sure safety issues for oil crews and residents alike are resolved.

This includes keeping emergency responders on top of rescue procedures and what to do in case of a major catastrophe that can come along with working with millions of gallons of combustible liquids.

It means being prepared if the bottom drops out of the industry.

It means having plans in place for roads that are likely to take more of a beating as thousands of pounds of equipment are hauled across them daily.

It means knowing where the water needed to produce each barrel of oil is going to come from and making sure the drinking water is clear of contamination.

It doesn't matter if it's Williston, Stanley, Minot or Dickinson; these communities are facing many of the same issues. That's why this discovery is a perfect opportunity to share insights.

Oil companies have been providing a closer look into their industry recently to those who are not schooled in the practice and don't know the difference between a derrick and a directional hole. This has included tours for area leaders and presentations at municipal meetings.

Having officials and residents knowledgeable about the industry is a favorable start to making sure some of these issues are approached and may also lead to more environmentally friendly practices.

While making plans for such an enormous discovery, we urge officials to think about what we want the area to look like 10 and even 50 years down the road.

The oil companies, cities, counties and residents must work together on plans and make this favorable find just that, favorable.

— The Dickinson Press Editorial Board meets weekly to discuss issues of importance to the community.

The logo for GrandForksHerald.com, featuring the text "GrandForksHerald.com" in a bold, sans-serif font, enclosed in a rectangular border. To the left of the text is a solid black circle.

Tom Dennis for the Herald, Published May 05 2010

## **OUR OPINION: Plan now to ensure bright future for N.D.**

You couldn't call it a groundswell — not just yet.

But as North Dakotans get used to the idea of living in an oil-rich state, leaders are warming to the notion of a “commission on the future,” a dedicated effort to look at the state’s options and start listing the pros and cons.

On Sunday, for example, A Dickinson Press editorial on the new Three Forks oil formation sounded a note of support. “While making plans for such an enormous discovery, we urge officials to think about what we want the area to look like 10 and even 50 years down the road,” the editorial suggested.

Then on Wednesday, a Bismarck Tribune story took a close look at the prospects of oil tax revenue pouring into the treasury, and found those prospects to be good:

“Crunching the numbers with the assumption that the projected five times-increase in Bakken wells equates to a five-times increase in revenue, it is possible that annual tax revenue from oil and gas alone could amount to \$2.5 billion, generating more than the state’s biennial budget alone,” the story noted.

What will that revenue mean: Tax cuts? Annual payments to state residents, as Alaska provides? A Permanent University Fund as Texas enjoys, a fund that has given Texas one of the biggest university endowments in the world?

One of the questions will be answered in November, the Tribune notes. That’s when the Legislature “will ask voters to approve a savings account it is calling the Legacy Fund.

“If voters approve, 30 percent of oil taxes will go into a fund that can’t be touched until 2017, when interest can be transferred to the general fund, and only 15 percent of the principal in any biennium. Even if voters agree, that still leaves 70 percent of oil taxes available.”

And all of this leads Rep. Shirley Meyer, D-Dickinson, to suggest that North Dakota start thinking about what the future holds.

Meyer, “a member of the legislative interim Budget Section and a House Appropriations subcommittee, says it is time for the state to look much further ahead,” the Tribune reported.

“‘The biggest danger we face is to think on a short-term basis,’ she said. She advocates for a taskforce to develop a 50-year plan focused on recognizing and building up the oil patch so it remains an economic driver. ...

“The money needs to be put to use today and put into infrastructure, roads and water,’ Meyer said. That has to happen while we have the surplus, so the surplus can keep happening. All I know is a session every other year for 80 days doesn’t do it. There’s not enough foresight.”

In April, a Herald editorial called for a Commission on the Future to study the oil boom, think about the boom’s impact and come up with ideas for boosting and sustaining prosperity in the state. The time is right, the momentum is building, the need is growing, and the moment is now.

— Tom Dennis for the Herald

The logo for GrandForksHerald.com, featuring the text "GrandForksHerald.com" in a bold, sans-serif font, enclosed in a rectangular border with a decorative, slightly distressed appearance.

Tom Dennis for the Herald, Published August 29 2010

## OUR OPINION: Oil boom shows need for Commission on the Future

In a series filled with sharp observations and wonderfully telling details, this line stood out: “Earlier this year, an extension service agent dashed into a meeting in Stanley a few minutes late, blaming it on the traffic.”

Doesn't that say it all? Imagine: Traffic problems now dog Stanley, N.D., population 1,279 in the 2000 census, a town so tranquil that its drugstore still boasts a soda fountain, and the soda fountain still makes Whirl-A-Whips. What staggering changes are under way in Stanley — and everywhere else across western North Dakota, as Forum Communications' “Running With Oil” series showed.

What a challenge for North Dakota's residents and leaders. And what an opportunity for residents to chart the course of their state. A Commission on the Future may be a place to start.

“Running With Oil” was one of the biggest journalism projects in Forum Communications' history — but as the stories showed, the subject deserved it. Everywhere reporters looked across the western region, they found tremendous potential as well as new and startling problems. Traffic jams in Stanley are just a fraction of the tale: There also are housing shortages, labor shortages, sewage-system inadequacies, beaten-to-heck highways, new demands on the region's water supply, growing concerns about the industrial landscape — all that and the threat of oil spills, too.

This problems have hit with such force that it'll be hard for a once-every-two-years Legislature to keep up. And as North Dakotans know, the western part of the state isn't the only region that's under the gun. Fargo-Moorhead is planning a billion-dollar flood diversion. Water-retention projects to further protect the valley could cost a billion more.

Then there is Devils Lake, where the threat of a catastrophic breakout has the state looking at another expensive remedy.

To North Dakota's incredible good fortune, a once-in-a-lifetime stream of revenue is available to tackle these once-in-a-lifetime challenges. But how to analyze the problems, plan solutions and then set priorities, all in the context of a vision for the state?

That's where a commission could come in, as mentioned before in this space.

At the federal level, where politics can stymie decision-making, commissions are a tried-and-true way of untying knotty problems. In 1983, a national commission helped improve Social Security's long-term solvency. The Base Realignment and Closure commissions successfully closed 350 military installations. And great hopes now are being placed on the president's commission on reducing the deficit.

North Dakota also has profited from well-designed, well-run commissions. The Roundtable on Higher Education is the most notable recent example.

“Years ago, North Dakota demographer Richard Rathge predicted doom and gloom for the state’s colleges and universities,” The Forum of Fargo-Moorhead reported last week.

“But as area colleges found ways to increase their enrollments despite the demographic challenges, Rathge is happy to admit he was wrong. ‘I’m very pleased that I have to eat crow and indicate that my initial projections of what would happen to the university system have not turned out to be true,’ said Rathge, director of the State Data Center at North Dakota State University.”

By bringing together respected leaders and then giving them the time and help needed to study the issues, a blue-ribbon commission can generate solutions. But a commission’s other product is even more important: consensus. After all, solutions are as close as the nearest blog (or editorial page). But a set of solutions that win the public’s respect and lawmakers’ votes across the political spectrum — that’s rare.

And that’s the kind of unifying vision North Dakota needs.

By the way, if a commission is formed, it might consider holding its first meeting in the Dakota Drug store in Stanley, home of the Whirl-A-Whip. Just remember, commission members: Allow extra time for traffic.