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STATE SENATOR • 12TH SENATE DISTRICT

Testimony on Senate Bill 663

Senate Committee on Universities and Technical Colleges

February 17, 2016

I want to thank Chairwoman Harsdorf and members of the committee for hearing Senate Bill 663 today.

Senate Bill 663 is one piece of legislation included in the Rural Wisconsin Initiative. The Rural Wisconsin Initiative is a push to draw attention to many of the problems facing rural Wisconsin. The four core issues the initiative attempts to address include education, health care, technology, and workforce development.

In many parts of rural Wisconsin, people are moving away in favor of more populated areas. This hurts the rural economies as businesses often struggle to locate educated individuals who have the necessary skills or training they need.

In attempt to address this issue and attract educated individuals to rural parts of the state, Senate Bill 663 creates rural opportunity zones. In these zones, \$25,000 or 40% of a new resident's student loans would be repaid, provided the new resident maintained a full time job, avoided public assistance, received a degree, and lived in a county that fit the OMB's definition of rural.

A similar program was pioneered in Kansas and Oklahoma had has been a strong incentive for individuals to relocate to rural areas after finishing their post-secondary education. In fact, Kansas has maintained the program for four years and has attracted more than 1,000 new residents through a similar program.

I want to thank Representatives Ed Brooks, Romaine Quinn, and Travis Tranel for their work on this bill, and I would also like to thank members of the committee for hearing this bill today. Please support Senate Bill 663.



EDWARD BROOKS

STATE REPRESENTATIVE

Testimony – Assembly Bill 794/Senate Bill 663
Senate Committee on Universities and Technical Colleges

February 17th, 2016

Chairperson Harsdorf and Members,

Thank you for the opportunity to testify before you today in favor of Senate Bill 663, which establishes Rural Opportunity Zones in the state of Wisconsin.

As someone who has spent his entire life in rural Wisconsin, I know that our communities have a lot to offer young families. However, Wisconsin's small towns and villages are not exempt from the trends of the last fifty years. The American population has been shifting away from rural areas toward cities and suburbs, and many rural counties in Wisconsin are losing or barely maintaining population.

Loss of population causes a downward spiral. As a population decreases, local businesses lose their consumer base, and new businesses look to locate elsewhere as the workforce shrinks. School districts that lose population also lose funding, which leads to fewer class offerings, and fewer incentives that would attract young high quality teachers to the district. We need to find a way to maintain and grow our population.

To that end, we are proposing the creation of rural opportunity zones, a concept pioneered in Kansas and Oklahoma, that would incentivize young people looking to relocate after finishing their post-secondary education.

In our vision of the program, Wisconsin would repay up to \$25,000 or 40% of a new resident's student loans, provided the new resident maintained a full time job, avoided public assistance, had attained a post-secondary degree, and settled in a county that fit the Federal OMB's definition of rural.

This is an idea whose time has come. Representative Petryk, who is a co-author on this bill, also authored and introduced a similar bill earlier this session that I

am co-sponsoring, as are several members of this committee. I think the parallel development of these two bills shows that Wisconsin is in need of these opportunity zones, and I'm happy to take any questions at this time.