

House Bill 158

EXHIBIT 2  
DATE 1-12-09  
HB 158

(H) Federal Relations, Energy, and Telecommunications

Testimony of Lesa Evers  
Economic Development Specialist in the  
Governor's Office of Economic Development

Mr. Chairman and Members of the Committee:

For the record, my name is Lesa Evers.

On behalf of the Governor's Office, I ask for your support and passage of House Bill 158.

As an Economic Development Specialist in the Governor's Office of Economic Development, I work closely with tribal governments to increase economic development opportunities on our Montana reservations.

The Big Sky Economic Development Trust Fund is an excellent financial resource created by the Legislature at the request of the Governor in 2005 and is an important vehicle that can help lead to real project development.

Planning grant dollars, one of the funding mechanisms in the Big Sky Economic Development Trust Fund, whether used for feasibility studies, architectural reports or preliminary engineering reports, are a critical first step in establishing the viability of a potential project.

Currently, Montana's tribal economic development efforts cannot directly access the planning grant portion of the Big Sky Trust Fund. Tribes must apply for these specific kinds of funds through their Certified Regional Development Corporation (CRDC). This has led to an underutilization of this portion of the Big Sky Economic Development Trust Fund in Indian Country – areas that are generally the most economically challenged in the state.

In every case, the CRDC is located off the reservation and therefore requires a fair amount of travel back and forth to the nearest CRDC. In some cases this means a commute of close to 100 miles roundtrip. Such an impediment is not good public policy if we, as a state, are to work hand in glove with tribal staff on economic development as part of our commitment to work on a government to government basis with our tribal nations.

House Bill 158 would simply remove the requirement of having to apply through the CRDC and allow the tribes to apply directly to the Department of Commerce for these planning grant dollars.

Tribes currently have the ability to directly apply for the job creation dollars (75%) of the Big Sky Trust Fund. So as it is currently written, the statute is inconsistent in how it is administered as tribes can apply for one portion of dollars directly but to access the other portion (25%), they must apply through a CRDC. The Governor's Office of Economic Development would like to see the process made consistent and allow tribes to have direct access to both programs under the Trust Fund.

It is our belief that by gaining direct access to these planning grant dollars, Montana's tribal nations will be able to more effectively use this first step as they develop projects on their respective reservations. Success in the planning approach, boosted by better access to the Big Sky Economic Development Trust Fund, will hopefully lead to Indian Country economic development growth that will also bring more job creation dollars from the trust fund into Indian Country.

House Bill 158 does not increase spending from the general fund or any other fund, but its passage will go a long way towards increasing tribal access to an important state program.

On behalf of Governor Schweitzer and the Governor's Office of Economic Development, I urge a "do pass" of House Bill 158.

Thank you.