

**Pamela Link, McLean County Commission Chairperson, U.S. Department of Energy, Quadrennial Energy Review Public Meeting: “Infrastructure Constraints” Workforce Development Panel, Bismarck, North Dakota, Aug. 8, 2014**

Good morning Secretary Moniz, Senator Heitkamp, members of the panel and distinguished guests. Thank you very much for the opportunity to take part in today’s essential discussions – which could help to advance balanced, responsible energy and infrastructure policies, bring solutions to a growing workforce need and assist with continued growth to this region and the United States.

My name is Pamela Link and I am involved in a variety of work in career. Currently, I hold the chairperson seat for the McLean County Commission in central North Dakota, am the Director, the New Business Development and Governmental Relations for the Laborers District Council of Minnesota and North Dakota and a small business owner. I take great pride in each one of these roles, as they lend me excellent opportunities to witness first hand many workforce challenges at local and state levels.

It is an exciting time for my home state and county. I live in a county that is starting its growth in oil development and has been a coal and energy producing county for 40 years. We have great jobs, solid incomes, great growth potential and a population segment that could be trained and ready for even bigger energy growth.

America has a demand that we are capable of meeting through responsible and environmentally sound development of domestic energy resources. North Dakota is a prime player in making that happen and stands in an envious spotlight. The state’s energy portfolio includes not only decades of oil and natural gas reserves, but also, wind and hydroelectric and an estimated 800 years’ worth of lignite. Beyond energy, the economic engines of our state include agriculture, manufacturing and tourism.

Thanks in significant part to the Bakken boom, North Dakota boasts the fastest-growing economy several years in the running and the lowest unemployment in the nation. Forbes

magazine recently ranked Bismarck and Fargo No. 1 and No. 2 overall for lowest unemployment, both having less than 2 percent, while the state hovers at 3 percent.

Those numbers may look phenomenal on the national scene, but it translates to one significant problem – workforce demands that are unheard of in the state’s 125-year history.

In short, North Dakota has a desperate need for workers and we need to tap into the workforce of states with problematic economies and into workers who are in positions beneath their skill levels.

According to the latest jobs report from North Dakota Job Service, North Dakota currently has 23,500 open jobs on its site – 15 percent higher than last year at this time. Those figures only represent jobs listed through the state service; there potentially are thousands more open, especially in the service industry.

Where are workers needed? The better question is where aren’t workers needed? First and foremost, every aspect of North Dakota’s infrastructure needs upgrades or critical expansions.

1. The oil and gas industries need rapid expansion of gathering and transmission lines.
2. Electric utilities need plant upgrades and new transmission lines to meet energy demands from the Bakken growth.
3. Small communities are experiencing unprecedented growth, needing new water treatment and sewage handling facilities.
4. Affordable housing is needed in dozens of communities to handle the influx of new residents.
5. North Dakota’s transportation system – just like every other state in the nation is in trouble. With the demands on our bridges, highways and rural roads, we are falling decades behind on basic improvements. Because of stalled pipeline installations and over demands on rail systems, oil trucking has increased exponentially, adding pressure to damaged roadways.

6. The state's rail system has challenges and needs upgrades and expansions to fulfill oil, coal and agriculture commerce and transportation.

Several thousand workers are needed just for these aforementioned state necessities. In addition, hundreds of ancillary service businesses connected to core infrastructure projects are crying out for employees. Much of that work requires skilled labor, individuals with two-year technical degrees or people simply desiring to work hard and build a better lifestyle.

With my role with the Laborers 563, I've recognized that members' work is overwhelmingly energy related. Whether they are building tank farms and pipelines in the oil field, or assisting with turnovers at the power plants and refineries, energy work is the Laborers' pipeline to financial security for their families. Three years ago, the Laborers Union had fewer than 120 registered members working in North Dakota. Today we have approximately 650 members, rising to as much as 1,200 at peak periods. Currently, the membership in North Dakota represents nearly 20 states, and when pipeline work ramps up, members come from more than 35 states.

As a commissioner in one of the smaller oil producing counties, I also get to see workforce needs from a different perspective. County employees – especially within the highway and law enforcement departments are persistently recruited by other counties and businesses, once their skills and experience grows. We've spent thousands more in the past three to four years, recruiting and replacing employees who've been drawn to the oil fields.

What we are seeing is a greater need for private business, state and local governments need to come together with programs and projects to find a necessary balance with regards to workforce.

Nine years ago I moved back to North Dakota working with marketing at the North Dakota Department of Commerce. One of my primary tasks was recruitment to bring back North Dakota natives to fill professional roles. Since then, with each employer, there has been continued projects involving workforce development and recruitment. The focus is no longer on bringing

back native North Dakota; instead the focus has vastly expanded to include workers from every sector across this nation.

For the first time, the Laborers 563 is taking an active role in workforce recruitment, rebranding and working on non-traditional methods to beef up the needed membership. We already have a professional training center – based in Minnesota that provides more than 50 different courses to fulfill construction work. However, in the last six months we've significantly increased the training taking place in North Dakota and our hope is to have our own North Dakota training facility within the next two years.

There is a segment of workforce in North Dakota and immediate surrounding states that can be tapped into by increasing skills and education so they may be able to step up in their careers and provide a better life for their families. The state already holds a wealth of workforce training centers and tech colleges that can help provide a skilled workforce.

During my work with the Laborers and a consortium of the North Dakota Building Trades and more than 80 union contractors, I've had an incredible opportunity to work with staff from the United Tribes Technical College and Fort Berthold Community College, learning more about their building trades programs. In addition, the Spirit Lake Nation and Standing Rock Reservation both have colleges with expanding skilled trades programs.

Steve Shepperd at United Tribes Technical College has vested a great deal of time and even personal resources. He has helped build excellent training programs providing CDLs, heavy-equipment operator licenses, certified welders and electricians.

Edna Sailer at Fort Berthold Community College has training in welding, CDL's, carpentry and safety. A small area of the Fort Berthold Indian Reservation lies within my county and additional training and opportunities for Tribal members in the county is a positive step toward reducing unemployment on the reservation.

As the Laborers expand their training programs in the state – our intent is to partner more with the Tribal colleges to see how we can complement each other’s programs.

With all the educational and training opportunities, there continues to be a vast gap in connecting qualified workers with appropriate employers. North Dakota Job Service does an incredible job and has an unbelievable workload, however, are there more unconventional avenues that can be explored to make workforce connections?

1. The Governor’s Office, North Dakota Department of Commerce and Job Service co-branded the “Find a Good Life in North Dakota” campaign.
2. Recently, CNN reported that EHarmony is getting into the business of connecting businesses with workers through Elevated Careers through EHarmony.
3. The North Dakota Ambassador program continues to recruit North Dakota natives to come back as employees or business owners.
4. The Laborers 563 and other North Dakota Building Trades welcome hundreds of new members from other state locals into training and apprenticeship programs and increasing training opportunities.
5. The North Dakota Department of Commerce invests money in internship programs with companies and contractors.
6. Sen. Heidi Heitkamp recently announced new funding sources for North Dakota’s tribal nations more than \$900,000 in federal funding to provide low-income and struggling Native Americans with employment and training opportunities.

## **Conclusion**

Workforce needs will only continue to grow within the state. When projects such as Sandpiper and Keystone XL pipelines are green-lighted, new utility lines continue to be constructed and the

federal and state DOTs release millions more for highway and bridge construction in the state, the employment crunch will continue.

A consortium of all major two-year and four-year colleges, state, local and private entities need to come together to create a greater clearing house of training and education opportunities, job opportunities and job seekers. It is about creating connections and greater awareness to availabilities and providing new programs for targeted workforce segments.

The peak of North Dakota's energy boom is not expected to crest until well past 2030.

According to a study commissioned by the North Dakota Industrial Commission, the population forecast for the 22 western and north central North Dakota counties indicates a 52 percent increase during the next 20 years. With that level of population growth, infrastructure projects will continue to increase, supporting businesses will to spring up and workforce development needs will continue to be challenged.

From my viewpoint as a North Dakota native, a County Commissioner and work with the Laborers 563, I am thrilled that my state is experiencing the economic and financial growth, but to sustain our place on the national and international scene as a prime energy producer, and to keep families economically strong, workforce recruitment, development and retention efforts need to take a greater priority.