



**Board of Commissioners**

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Members of the Minnesota Senate and House of Representatives representing Wright County:

As you know, Wright County is deeply concerned about access to adequate driver and vehicle testing services for our residents. We write to express our concern and seek your assistance in working with the Department of Driver and Vehicle Services (DVS) to provide for the future re-opening of the DVS testing center located in Buffalo, MN, particularly as it relates to the provision of behind-the-wheel road tests.

Even before the arrival of the COVID-19 pandemic, Wright County's population was growing, and demand for convenient access to driver testing services was increasing. Yet, even as we grew to more than 136,000 residents—making us the 10<sup>th</sup> most populated county in the entire state—we were only served by a DVS testing center that operated two days a week out of our County Government Center in Buffalo.

Nearly one year ago, in March of 2020, the Buffalo testing center was closed as part of DVS's complete shutdown of all 93 of its testing sites as part of the State's response to the COVID-19 pandemic. As a County Board, the health and welfare of our residents is of paramount concern, so we understand why this step was taken. However, it also had the effect of worsening the driver testing backlog in our area.

Now, a full year later, DVS has begun to gradually re-open some of its testing centers across the state. In its "Legislative Report on the DPS-DVS Exam Backlog" dated December 2020, DVS outlined the timing of four phases on which it would reopen a number of additional testing centers through May 2021. Unfortunately, the four phases only address around 30 of the 93 testing centers across the state. For others, including Buffalo, the report does not address their reopening at all. To make matters worse, the report also does not articulate if, when, or how the decision will be made to reopen additional testing centers.

This issue is particularly salience to Wright County as we are currently constructing our new County Government Center. Our hope and expectation has been that DVS would continue to operate a testing center located in the new facility, as it has done in the current one. However, we are fearful that the testing center in Buffalo will never re-open. In fact, the first indication the County received that we may lose our testing site in favor of DVS consolidating its staff in a center in Hennepin County was before Minnesota even had its first confirmed case of COVID-19. With our growing population and rapidly developing communities, this is a time to enhance service in Wright County, not cut it.

The impact on our residents is real. Wright County residents are forced to compete with residents of other counties for appointments at testing sites in other areas of the state. For those lucky enough to secure an appointment, they still may be forced to wait months for an available time slot and drive an hours-long roundtrip to a testing center. We understand that DVS has indicated that consolidating staff at fewer testing centers has helped achieve efficiencies that have helped the agency address its backlog statewide. Even if that is true, the agency has only achieved those efficiencies by shifting some of the burden of travel costs and time from the agency onto the residents it is supposed to serve.

To be clear, we support the ongoing efforts by the legislature to expand the availability across the entire state, and we thank our own delegation for championing those efforts. For example, SF 1656/HF 1141, which would allow local governments to provide testing options through their deputy registrars, or SF 276/HF 391, which would allow for private third-party testing.

That said, in addition to those efforts, we have a particular interest and concern in ensuring that Wright County continues to be served by the testing center in Buffalo. We are reaching out to seek your guidance and help in taking the next steps necessary to achieve some certainty about the future of this vital issue.

Thank you for your consideration,