

Rep. Jeff Van Drew (NJ-02) – AG Subcommittee Testimony

Hello Chairman Bishop and Ranking Member Fortenberry, thank you for giving me the opportunity to testify before the Appropriations Agriculture subcommittee today.

I am here to request \$3.75 million in community project funding towards the Salem County Courthouse located in Salem City, New Jersey.

This project is eligible and deserving of Community Project Funding through the USDA Community Facilities Account. It has received a letter of eligibility from the NJ USDA office of Rural Development and Community Facilities, as well as letters of support from local officials. Further, the guidance issued by this subcommittee explicitly references courthouses as an eligible category.

Salem County, and the county seat of Salem City in which the County Courthouse is located is a low-income, low-population, rural, and majority minority community. The County has found itself in an increasingly difficult financial situation over the past decade. Between 2010 and 2015, Salem County lost \$530 million in ratables. In 2016, it lost another \$126 million. Salem County and Salem City have suffered from population loss, disinvestment, and natural disasters that have significantly impacted the communities' finances. As the County Commissioner Director states in his letter of support of this project, Salem City is "our poorest city in New Jersey's poorest county."

The current Courthouse infrastructure is insufficient to meet demand that has expanded three-fold over recent decades. The planned improvements expand their facilities by nearly 100,000 square feet and address issues including:

- Failure to comply with handicap accessibility.

- Lack of ballistic glass in windows.
- Lack of sufficient camera coverage on the premises.
- Lack of duress alarms.
- Lack of proper screening areas.
- Lack of a secure and separate parking area for Judges.

The current state of the courthouse presents a public safety issue for the entire community.

The State of New Jersey has mandated that Salem County is required to modernize the courthouse and is responsible for the capital costs incurred in constructing, expanding, and renovating the court facilities. Salem County not only supports this Community Project Funding submission, the community needs it to survive this obligation being forced upon the County.

The Salem County Courthouse project, which in sum will amount to an obligation of \$38 million, is yet another liability against the county's finances. The County has already obligated \$30 million through debt-financing, a tremendous burden for such an underprivileged community. This money will serve as a match against the requested Community Project Funding relief. It is crucial that the committee provide the requested Community Facility Funding to this project, so the most disadvantaged county in New Jersey receives a lifeline that it so desperately needs.

This project is eligible and deserving of Community Project Funding of the requested \$3.75 million. The USDA Community Facilities Program exists to support projects exactly like this one. South Jersey needs this, Salem County needs this, and Salem City needs this funding which will keep our community safer and the scales of justice moving as they were intended to. I urge you to include this funding in this year's appropriations bill.

Thank you for your time Ranking Member Fortenberry and Chairman Bishop.