



Land of Sky Rural Planning Organization

339 New Leicester Highway

Suite 140

Asheville, North Carolina 28806

Phone: (828) 251-6622 • Fax: (828) 251-6353

Website: www.landofskyrpo.org • E-mail:
vicki.eastland@landofsky.org

The Honorable Pete Buttigieg
U.S. Department of Transportation
1200 New Jersey Avenue, SE
Washington, DC 20590

Dear Secretary Buttigieg:

Please accept this letter of support for the North Carolina Department of Transportation's (NCDOT's) **Building rUral Equity by Replacing Infrastructure and Driving Good Economies ("BLUE RIDGE")** grant application to the FHWA Bridge Investment Program (BIP). **BLUE RIDGE** (or "the Project" hereafter) will replace five bridges along Interstate 40 (I-40) between mile markers 29 and 33 in rural Haywood County, North Carolina. The Project is located on a segment of I-40 that serves as a critical connection for residents to access essential goods and services and supports regional employment patterns and cross-country freight movement. By replacing this aging infrastructure, the Project will not only immediately improve safety conditions, but it will also advance local and regional priorities related to mobility, economic competitiveness, and environmental resilience.

This Project will accomplish BIP goals to improve the safety, efficiency, and reliability of the movement of people and freight by improving the condition of our nation's bridges while also creating an equitable transportation system with benefits that serve Haywood County residents and business as well as the greater western North Carolina region. The Project will address the following:

State of Good Repair: The Project is needed to bring the bridges into a state of good repair by reconstructing them according to current NDCOT and federal standards—one bridge is structurally deficient, three are functionally obsolete, and all five have reached the end of their useful life.

Safety: Between 2017 and 2022, there were 57 crashes on the Project bridges, including 21 that resulted in injuries. The Project bridges are characterized by substandard shoulder widths, substandard lane widths, and inadequate clearances on secondary routes. Inspection reports note the structures require repairs related to corrosion, delamination, section loss, with damage to guardrails and substructures. These improvements will reduce crashes on the Project bridges by 85% and reduce injuries on the bridges by 68%, thereby creating a safer environment for all roadway users.

Mobility and Economic Competitiveness: The Project is important to the mobility and economic activity in the area as workers use the Project bridges to reach Haywood County's major employers like Evergreen Packaging and those located in the Beaverdam Industrial Park. The corridor also serves as a commuter route for the 20% of Haywood County residents who work in Buncombe and Henderson Counties. Furthermore, I-40 is part of the National Highway Freight Network, and trucks account for nearly 15% of the corridor's traffic volume. The safe operation of the Project bridges is essential to the movement of goods and materials between the eastern seaboard's major ports, including Charleston, SC (275 miles away), Savannah, GA (317 miles way), and Wilmington, NC (336 miles away), and manufacturing and distribution facilities the southeastern and midwestern United States.

Climate Change, Resiliency, and the Environment: The Project will replace the existing five bridges with one new bridge and three vehicular culverts. The construction and maintenance of the culverts will lead to fewer greenhouse gas (GHG) emissions and less energy use compared to that of a bridge. Additionally, the Project will reduce the GHG

emissions associated with vehicle miles traveled when taking detours due to closures and disruptions on I-40. The Project will also support regional resiliency by ensuring that travel along I-40 can continue and serve as a reliable alternative to US 19 and other local roads. While US 19 is another key roadway through Haywood County, it experiences frequent closures due to flooding and geotechnical failures.

Quality of Life: Many Haywood County residents travel to Asheville and other destinations in Buncombe County to access employment, medical care, and other goods and services. The Project will benefit the County and its residents who rely on I-40 to meet their daily needs and for critical emergency medical services. The segment of I-40 in the Project area is also used for Haywood Public Transit's door-to-door bus service that takes riders to destinations within the county and to hospitals and government offices in Buncombe and Jackson County. The service is critical to maintaining equitable transportation options for elderly, low-income, and car free populations.

Innovation: Bundling the five Project bridge replacements into a single project and contract is an innovative approach that promotes more efficient and cost-effective project delivery. As recognized by the FHWA, bridge bundling streamlines processes related to design, contracting, and construction. By bundling the Project bridges, BLUE RIDGE will reduce project costs by six percent and accelerate project delivery. Furthermore, the project will replace four bridges with culverts, which will minimize impacts, reduce costs, provide flexibility for future interstate widening, and create a more resilient infrastructure system. Innovative approaches to accelerating construction are the cornerstone of this Project and make BLUE RIDGE critical to the transportation network in the region.

I personally travel this route 5-10 times per week in the course of my employment. I have noticed a dramatic increase in the frequency of delays caused by issues with these bridges. Often, these bottlenecks then contribute to secondary crashes which lead to even more lengthy delays while putting motorists and First Responders at additional risk. The Project bridges are in immediate need of replacement to bring them into a state of good repair. The BIP grant would support that work and provide safe and reliable access along I-40, a route critical to the local and regional mobility, economic activity, and overall vitality. Thus, **Land of Sky Rural Planning Organization** strongly encourages you to support the **BLUE RIDGE** and NCDOT's application for federal BIP grant funding to accelerate the replacement of the Project bridges.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'Mathew Wachtel', written in a cursive style.

**Mathew Wachtel, Commissioner Madison County, NC,
Chair, Land of Sky Rural Planning Organization**