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February 17, 2020

Honorable Elaine Chao
U.S. Secretary of Transportation
U.S. Department of Transportation
1200 New Jersey Avenue, SE
Washington, DC 20590

Dear Secretary Chao:

Please accept this letter of support for the North Carolina Department of Transportation's (NCDOT's) Future I-87 Resiliency, Innovation, Safety, Economy Project (the "Future I-87 RISE Project" or "the Project" hereafter) application to the U.S. Department of Transportation's INFRA Program. The Future I-87 RISE Project is the result of a continuous thoughtful and coordinated strategy to support regional and national economic vitality through the deployment of innovative technology and creative infrastructure investments to improve freight mobility, rural access, and infrastructure resiliency specifically in an underserved portion of eastern North Carolina. The Project combines multiple complementary investments selected for their ability to deliver improved corridor performance and system resiliency while increasing the physical and digital connectivity of rural communities in eastern North Carolina. The Project is a large step forward in realizing North Carolina's vision to build out and harden the network of freight distribution/military corridors in eastern North Carolina.

The future I-87 corridor traverses rural eastern North Carolina, connecting Raleigh, NC at its southern terminus and the Hampton Roads-Norfolk region in Virginia at its northern terminus. When fully completed, this corridor will serve as an interstate connection between the Port of Virginia and I-95. This corridor is critical to connecting northeastern North Carolina industries and farms to their best export option through the Port of Virginia and represents concerted cooperation across state lines to realize national economic development opportunities. Improvements along the future I-87 corridor will also capitalize on the \$270M investments in the Carolina Connector Intermodal Rail Terminal (CCX), removing barriers along the transportation route between CCX, the I-95 corridor, and the Port of Virginia. It is projected that activity at CCX will reduce shipping costs by 40% and increase the efficiency of the movement of goods, producing national economic trade benefits. Project investments in this corridor will improve the road to interstate standards from Zebulon to Williamston, make upgrades to several interchanges, and widen the road to

six lanes in the vicinity of Zebulon. The Project will make numerous spot improvements to mitigate road flooding in the Princeville area. Collectively, these improvements will offer rural residents a safer and faster travel option to access the Raleigh job market.

Future I-87 and the U.S. 64 extension out to the coast are important evacuation routes. The Project will install fiber optic cable along the entire length of the future I-87 corridor, as well as the extension of U.S. 64 from Williamston to Whalebone. This investment will permit NCDOT to implement state-of-the-art wind and flood monitoring, manage the corridor in a coordinated manner with I-95 and U.S. 70 (future I-42) where fiber is already being installed, prepare for the future implementation of connected and autonomous vehicles, enhance broadband capability in this underserved rural area, and offer the potential for revenue opportunities to NCDOT through the lease of excess fiber capacity. The installation of fiber will also represent a sound investment due to the projected revenue generation the state will see from providing a fiber/broadband “backbone” for additional incremental private investment in network expansion to rural areas.

While the Project addresses multiple evaluation criteria for the INFRA program, improving the economic competitiveness of eastern North Carolina’s rural communities along future I-87 lies at the heart of this project. This INFRA grant, when combined with the significant state investment, would position North Carolina to immediately move forward to improve safety, address key bottlenecks, and further build out the backbone of its eastern freight network while simultaneously improving the resiliency of key evacuation routes used by residents of North Carolina and neighboring states. The Project is a prudent investment that will increase the return on prior federal investments and proactively protect existing transportation assets, thereby preventing future losses.

For these reasons, we strongly urge you to support the Future I-87 Resiliency, Innovation, Safety, Economy Project and the NCDOT’s application for federal INFRA grant funding to accelerate its construction.

Sincerely, 

W. B. Bullock
Rocky Mount Urban Area MPO
Transportation Advisory Committee
Chairman