

Columbus County

ADMINISTRATION

TELEPHONE
910-640-6630



TELEFAX
910-640-1654

March 2, 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) US 74 Corridor Opportunities for Rural Efficiency and Safety Improvement project (US 74 CORESI), herein the Project) application to the U.S. Department of Transportation's INFRA Program. The US 74 Corridor Opportunities for Rural Efficiency and Safety Improvement 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 regional and rural areas of southern North Carolina.

The Project comprises ten discrete elements along 330 miles of the US Route 74 corridor between Asheville and Wilmington. North Carolina's US 74 corridor passes through largely rural regions of the state and is currently characterized by inconsistencies in travel speeds, recurring bottlenecks at signalized intersections, and a relatively high occurrence of vehicular accidents as the corridor passes directly through regional centers. The primary objectives of the CORESI project are to improve efficiency (travel time), safety, infrastructure resiliency, and the provision of broadband fiber along the entirety of the US 74 corridor between Asheville and Wilmington through a series of intersection-to-interchange upgrades, the completion of the final stages of a major bypass around Shelby, and ITS and signal improvements. Lastly, the Project will include the installation of fiber optic cabling along nearly the entire length US 74 project corridor where this is currently not available, enabling future ITS technology and bringing high speed telecommunications including broadband to large swathes of rural North Carolina.

The delivery of the Project will bring about a harmonization and continuity of free flow along this key freight corridor, with outcomes stemming from the implementation the Project to include an increase in vehicle capacity, faster travel times throughout the entire corridor, a decrease in recurring and non-recurring congestion, and improved safety conditions resulting in a reduction in accidents and fatalities. Furthermore, the installation of fiber optics cabling along these sections of US 74 will enable the foundation for the future deployment of ITS technologies providing tremendous potential for many other communications mechanisms including broadband internet, cameras, and future connected and autonomous vehicle (both passenger and freight) technology. The rural and semi-rural communities

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along the candidate project corridor currently lack adequate broadband services, isolating these communities from opportunity, hindering economic growth, and generating safety implications through inconsistent access to 911 and emergency services.

The impact on commercial road freight movement as a result of the delivery of the Project will be significant. In improving the consistency of control of access through more than 300 miles of the US 74 corridor, commercial freight will be able to traverse the southern part of North Carolina and connect to a significant part of the country's eastern interstate system in a reliably more efficient and safer manner. The majority of intersection-to-interchange upgrades within the Project take place between on the nationally recognized Critical Rural Freight Corridor (CRFC) between the Port of Wilmington and Lumberton and will both enhance commercial road freight movement between the Port and Interstate 95, the freight backbone of the Atlantic Coast, as well as between the Port and Charlotte, the largest city in the Carolinas.

While the Project addresses multiple evaluation criteria for the INFRA program, improving the economic competitiveness of eastern and southern North Carolina's rural communities along US Route 74 is at the heart of this project. This INFRA grant, when combined with 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 southern 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 state and federal investments and proactively protect existing transportation assets, thereby preventing future losses.

For these reasons, we strongly urge you to support the US 74 Corridor Opportunities for Rural Efficiency and Safety Improvement project and the NCDOT's application for federal INFRA grant funding to accelerate its construction.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in blue ink that reads "Michael H. Stephens". The signature is fluid and cursive, with the first name being the most prominent.

Michael H. Stephens
County Manager