

# *Continuing Corridor K: Connecting People, Goods, and Services*

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## **Nationally Significant Federal Lands and Tribal Projects Program Grant Application for Fiscal Year 2022**

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Project Name:	Continuing Corridor K: Connecting People, Goods, and Services
Total Project Cost:	\$316,689,276
NSFLTP Grant Request Amount:	\$49,000,000
Federal Funding Including Program Funds Requested:	\$316,689,276
Total Non-Federal Funding:	\$0
Is this project adjacent to, within, or accessing federal land?	Yes- Project provides access to and is within Nantahala National Forest, provides access to Appalachian National Scenic Trail, provides access to and is within Tribal Transportation Facilities of the Eastern Band of Cherokee Indians (EBCI), and 11 miles south of Great Smokey Mountains National Park entrance

Submitted by the North Carolina Department of Transportation

Supplemental Materials Available Online at:

<https://connect.ncdot.gov/resources/NSFLT2022-CorridorK/Pages/default.aspx>

Unique Entity Identifier Number: XSN8A4TT1DY5

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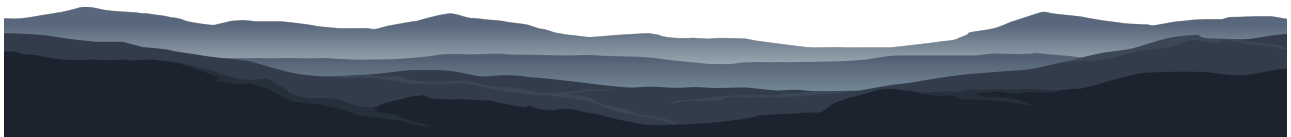
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# Continuing Corridor K: Connecting People, Goods, and Services

## FY 2022 NSFLTP Grant Application

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# ***Continuing Corridor K: Connecting People, Goods, and Services***

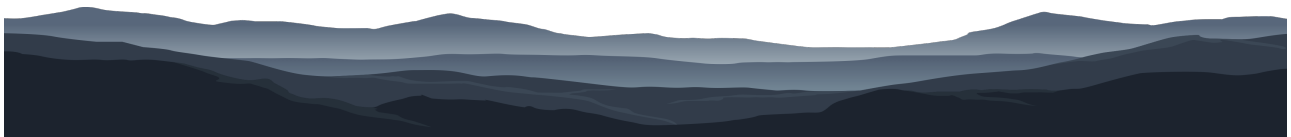
## **FY 2022 NSFLTP Grant Application**

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### Project at a Glance

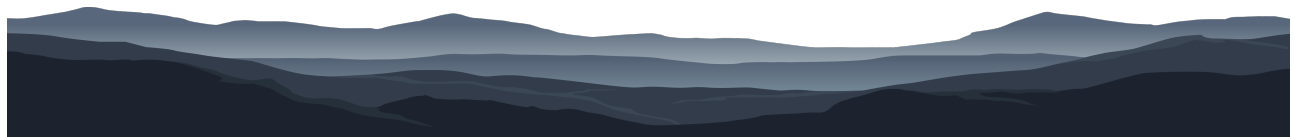
*Continuing Corridor K: Connecting People, Goods and Services*, or “The Project” herein, provides vital resources for the Appalachian Region of Western North Carolina: a reliable, multimodal transportation network. State Transportation Improvement Program (STIP) Project A-0009C will complete one of the final sections of Corridor K of the Appalachian Development Highway System

#### *Continuing Corridor K:*

- ✓ Completes one of the last sections of the Appalachian Development Highway System
- ✓ Improves facilities on the Tribal Transportation Facilities Inventory
- ✓ Provides increased connectivity for local and commercial traffic on a vital rural route
- ✓ Provides improved access to employment, medical facilities, commercial centers and education facilities
- ✓ Improves safety and reliability for supporting improved quality of life for a rural population
- ✓ Provides economic benefits and needed support for improved quality of life
- ✓ Local stakeholders support improving existing routes
- ✓ Improves multimodal connectivity, including a land bridge to access the Appalachian National Scenic Trail that can accommodate wildlife crossings

(ADHS) in Western North Carolina. The Project improves the current three lane section of US 129 and NC 143 in Robbinsville and corrects the two-lane deficient roadway typical of NC 143 and NC 28 from Robbinsville to Stecoah. These improvements include a land bridge for wildlife and pedestrians in Robbinsville at the Appalachian National Scenic Trail (ANST) crossing on NC 143, and near Stecoah, wider 10-foot shoulders including a 8-foot paved shoulder, improved horizontal and vertical alignments, and climbing and passing lanes. Project A-0009C will enhance mobility and the economic vitality of Graham County by providing a reliable, safe transportation network for all users, including wildlife!

*Continuing Corridor K: Connecting People, Goods, and Services* is a vital link in the overall economic vitality of Graham County and aims to meet the initial goals of the ADHS: to generate economic development in previously isolated areas, supplement the interstate system, and provide access to areas within the Appalachian region. The Project touches a number of communities in need, including underserved communities and tribal entities, and serves to address longstanding transportation challenges through [award-winning public engagement and environmental stewardship efforts](#). The Project improves Tribal Transportation Facilities and improves access to the Nantahala National Forest and the Great Smoky Mountains National Park.



### I. Project Overview

*Continuing Corridor K: Connecting People, Goods, and Services* will complete one of the final sections of Corridor K of the ADHS in Western North Carolina. This section, identified as A-0009C, serves a local, regional, and national significance as a crucial corridor for local and regional travelers in an isolated part of the State but also as a major cog in connecting the Appalachian region to itself and beyond. Corridor K is included in the original ADHS authorized by Congress in 1965 and stretches from I-75 near Cleveland, TN to Corridor A (US 23) near Dillsboro, NC. Within North Carolina, 65.8 of the 83.9 miles along this corridor have been improved. Planning for the A-0009C section restarted in 2015.

#### Project Description

North Carolina Department of Transportation's (NCDOT) Project A-0009C is focused on improvements to existing US 129, NC 143, and NC 28 in Graham County from US 129 in Robbinsville to the existing four-lane divided section of NC 28 in Stecoah. This facility will be constructed as a two-lane principle arterial with climbing and passing lanes.

*Continuing Corridor K: Connecting People, Goods, and Services* is critical to long-distance travel in and from western North Carolina to surrounding counties. It is vital for local trips within Graham County. The project will improve roadway reliability for local and commercial traffic that moves through the area. Increased reliability is crucial for residents who must travel out of the county for jobs, education, healthcare, and other vital services, as well as for commercial traffic which use these roads to transport goods in and out of North Carolina. These improvements will bring about

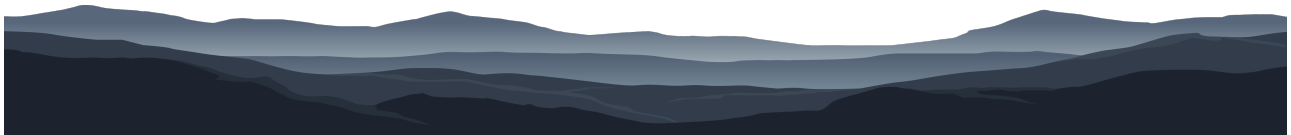
economic benefits for a rural county with a declining workforce.

US 129, NC 143, and NC 28 are recent additions to the National Highway System (NHS) and will be utilized as a detour route for the many landslides that occur along US 74 in the Nantahala Gorge. The most recent closures occurred between 2019 and 2020 in five separate instances. The improved facility will provide reliable access for local and commercial traffic that cannot travel through the Nantahala Gorge due to closures.

The project will include a land bridge over NC 143 along the ANST which stretches from Georgia to Maine. The land bridge will not only serve as a vital pedestrian crossing for hikers and everyday users, but also as a wildlife crossing. The Appalachian region serves as a migration corridor for much of the East Coast. The land bridge will aid in many species' migration patterns by providing safe, separated passage between animals and vehicles traveling on NC 143.

#### Transportation Challenge

The roadway network in Graham County area is limited to three primary highways: US 129, NC 143, and NC 28. Many segments along these roadways have steep grades, sharp curves and may have paved or unpaved shoulders of varying widths or even no shoulders. Grades often exceed 6% in mountainous areas, most notably of which is Stecoah Gap on NC 143. Steep grades, narrow lane widths, and sharp curves on NC 143 and NC 28 affect travel speed and opportunities to pass slower vehicles. There is an inability to pass slower vehicles over substantial distances. Speed limits within the study area generally range from 25 miles per hour (mph) in tight curve sections to 55 mph





# Continuing Corridor K: Connecting People, Goods, and Services

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in straighter sections with better sight distance.

A reliable transportation network is vital to the residents in Graham County to access higher education and hospitals – none of which exist in Graham County – and employment opportunities. The nearest hospital, university, and dialysis center are in the Sylva/Cullowhee, NC area, roughly 50 miles away, while the closest trauma center is in Asheville (100 miles). Community college students need to travel to either the Tri-County Community College in Murphy, NC (40 miles) or Southwestern Community College in Sylva, NC (50 miles).

As of FY 2021, 2,814.3 miles of the 3,090 mile (91.1%) ADHS is under construction or open to traffic. Within North Carolina, 18.1 miles remain uncompleted, which includes 11.6 miles that will be constructed under

Project A-0009C. Given the challenges associated with Western North Carolina’s mountainous terrain, sensitive natural habitat, and proximity to significant tribal territory, the proposed project is among one of the last ADHS corridors to be completed.

### Project Location

The A-0009C project is located along Corridor K from Robbinsville to Stecoah in Graham County. Specifically, the improvements are along the following roadways:

- ✓ US 129 from south of SR 1275 (Five Points Road) to NC 143 (Sweetwater Road) in Robbinsville (0.2 miles)
- ✓ NC 143 (Sweetwater Road) from US 129 to NC 28 (8.8 miles)
- ✓ NC 28 from NC 143 to east of SR 1235 (Gunters Gap Road) near Stecoah (2.6 miles)

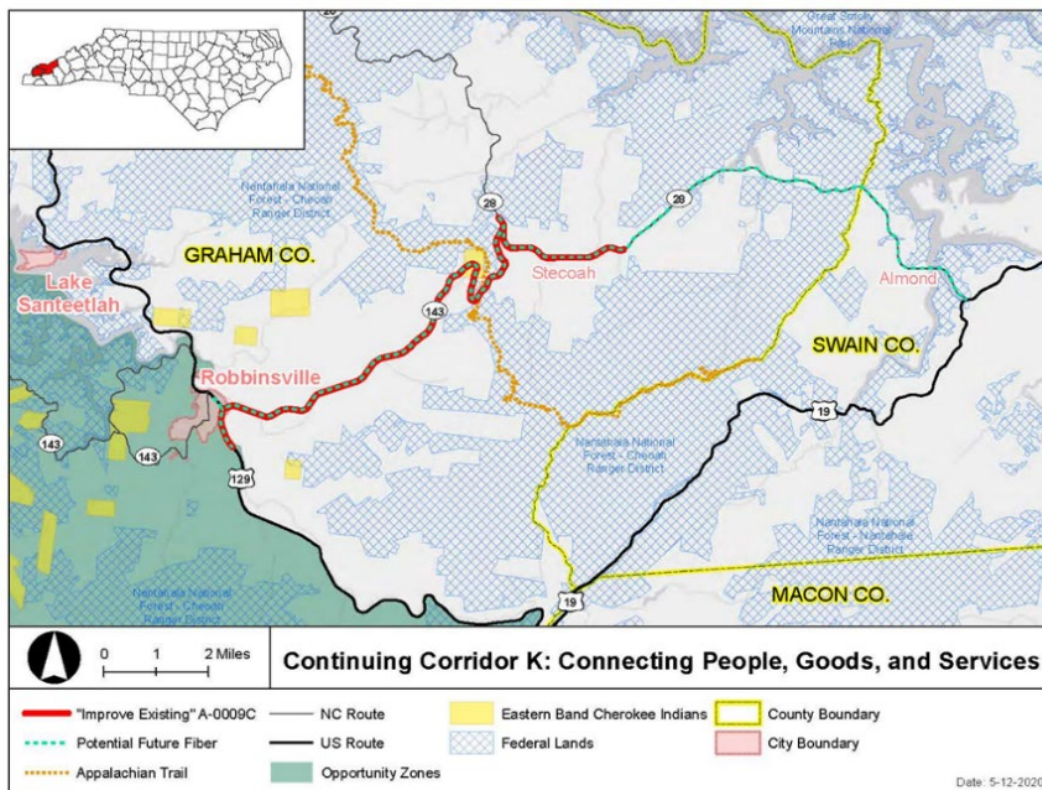
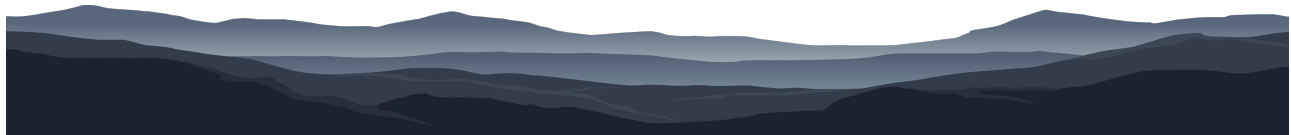


Figure 1 illustrates the routes included in *Continuing Corridor K: Connecting People, Goods and Services*



The entire project is located within and provides access to the Nantahala National Forest. The sections of A-0009C along US 129 and NC 143 are part of the National Tribal Transportation Facility Inventory. The section of NC 143 (Sweetwater Road) also passes through land owned by Eastern Band of Cherokee Indians (EBCI) just west of the ANST. In addition, the Great Smoky National Park, which received 14.2 million visitors in 2021, is 11.5 miles away from the intersection of NC 143 and NC 28 (via NC 28).

Census tract 37075920300 is within the Corridor K study area. This tract is a candidate opportunity zone classified as a rural economically distressed area of the Appalachian Region of North Carolina. Graham County suffers from high unemployment, job scarcity, and a lack of long and short-term investments in the area. The entire project is in a rural area outside of an urbanized area, as defined by the 2010 US Census.

#### Project Parties

NCDOT will lead and administer the Project. NCDOT has extensive experience managing Federal and State infrastructure projects. NCDOT is responsible for maintaining approximately 80,000 miles of roadways, making it one of the largest state-maintained roadway network in the country. Notably, North Carolina is one of only nine states where counties maintain no ownership of any roadways.

#### Grant Funds, Sources and Uses of all Project Funding

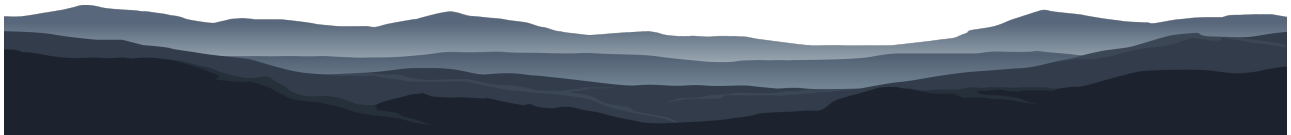
This section outlines the funding strategy for the *Continuing Corridor K* project. As previously mentioned in the Project Description, A-0009C is part of Corridor K which is one of the projects still outstanding

in the Appalachian Regional Commission's ADHS plan. With ADHS funding dwindling, the State is pursuing alternative funding sources to complete the remaining sections.

#### Sources

As of July 2022, NCDOT estimated the total funding needed for construction of A-0009C was \$163 Million. To increase the opportunity for regional and local contractors to potentially bid on the project, A-0009C was originally split into 3 sections to lower the cost of each contract: CA, CB, and CC. Unfortunately, the low bids for sections CA and CB came in substantially higher than expected due to current market conditions. Once engineering and contingencies are included, an additional \$110 Million is needed just for these two sections (total cost for these two sections is nearly \$197 Million)! This now brings the total estimated cost for A-0009C to approximately \$317 Million as outlined in Table 2. NCDOT has committed to use the state's remaining available ADHS funds, totaling an estimated \$268 Million (which are a 100% federal share), to complete the project (this figure includes future ADHS funds through FY 2026 apportioned in the Bipartisan Infrastructure Law). However, this leaves a funding gap of \$49 Million.

NCDOT has reviewed the costs for section CC based on the bids for sections CA and CB and estimates that \$120 Million is needed, including engineering and contingencies. Given that this cost is significantly higher than originally anticipated, NCDOT has



Section	Total Construction Cost	ADHS Funds	Requested NSFLTP Funds
A-0009CA	\$57,000,000*	\$46,300,000	\$10,700,000
A-0009CB	\$139,689,276*	\$113,289,276	\$26,400,000
A-0009CC	\$80,000,000	\$75,700,000	\$4,300,000
A-0009CD	\$40,000,000	\$32,400,000	\$7,600,000
<b>Total</b>	<b>\$316,689,276</b>	<b>\$267,689,276</b>	<b>\$49,000,000</b>

Table 1: Project Budget

\*Project awarded. Amount based on contract amount plus 20% for engineering and contingencies.

decided to further split section CC into sections CC (a shorter length version of the original section CC) and CD for two reasons: to lower the contract cost to potentially attract regional and local contractors to bid on the project; and in the event that the funding gap of \$49 Million is not filled, section CC can continue to move forward. If NCDOT does not receive the \$49 Million requested as part of the Nationally Significant Federal Lands and Tribal Projects (NSFLTP) Grant, the Department will seek funding through other grant opportunities and submit the project through NCDOT’s data-driven prioritization process where the project must score high enough for state and/or federal funding.

### Project Budget and Planned Uses

The budget for the Project is summarized in Table 1. NCDOT is requesting \$49,000,000 in NSFLTP capital funding to facilitate the construction of A-0009C. This represents 15.5% of the total construction cost.

## II. Statutory Criteria

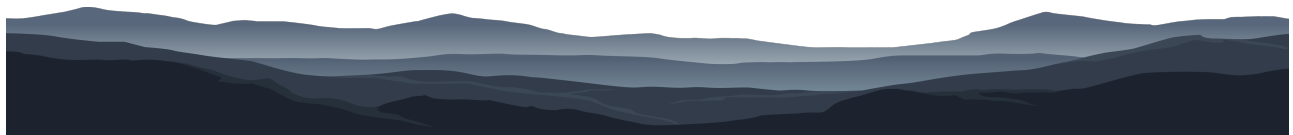
The Project is not only significant as it addresses one of the two remaining gaps of Corridor K in the ADHS, it also positively impacts commercial travel through the state of North Carolina. As part of the NHS, US 129, NC 143 and NC 28 will provide an alternate truck route accessing western North Carolina and rural Appalachia. The project

meets the merit criteria, both statutory and discretionary, while also addressing critical investment in improving transportation in a rural part of Western North Carolina.

### Safety

The A-0009C project is being designed with a focus on safety features. NCDOT seeks to help address safety concerns by improving the existing facilities with a focus on safety for all users. The proposed improvements include:

- Full shoulders on existing roadways where either no shoulder or only partial shoulders exist to help provide a safe area for motorists to pull over if necessary and to help drivers recover from lane-departures;
- Improved sidewalks in Robbinsville on NC 143 and US 129 plus full shoulders throughout the project length help address pedestrian, bicyclist, and other personal mobility-related crashes by providing separation between motorists and other users of the roadway corridor;
- Multi-use path adjacent to NC 28 in Stecoah
- Climbing/passing lanes to help reduce the potential for lane departure-related crashes associated with drivers passing in areas of limited sight distance due to steep grades and curves throughout the project corridor;





- A new land bridge that will allow safe travel over NC 143 to provide access to the ANST and serve as a safe passage for wildlife, thus reducing the risk of wildlife and pedestrian-related incidents.

A thorough safety analysis is included on The Project's supplemental materials site.

### State of Good Repair

Once complete, Corridor K will provide for national economic interests, enhance local economic development opportunities along and near the corridor, and provide an improved system of transportation for both routine travel and emergency travel in the event of a natural or national crisis. The project will restore the good condition of infrastructure that supports commerce and growth and reduce the barriers separating workers from employment by reducing transportation network gaps connecting this region of Appalachia to job opportunities and higher education.

The project is designed to improve the condition of existing facilities by providing safe options for turn lanes, passing/climbing lanes and wider shoulders for emergency pull-offs. The construction will correct deficient drainage systems, and deteriorating pavement conditions, stabilize steep slopes, widen lane widths, and add or improve pedestrian facilities along the corridor.

### Economic Competitiveness

There will be percentage gains in same-day truck delivery markets due to the ADHS investments in *Continuing Corridor K*. There are two key findings from the "Economic Analysis of Completing the Appalachian Development Highway System" Technical Report on the [ADHS website](#). First, the counties that were "most affected" in terms of travel efficiency benefits also tended to

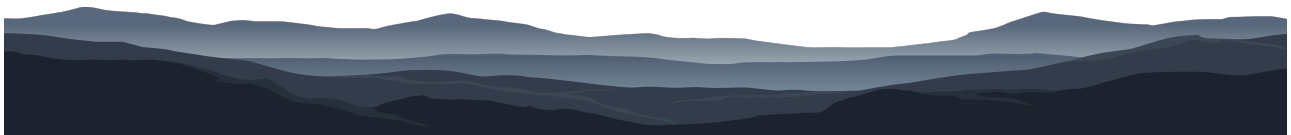


Figure 2 illustrates a common theme along The Project area: motorists stuck behind slower-moving traffic. By including additional climbing and passing lanes, travel time reliability will be improved.

have the largest gain in same day truck market access. Second, the truck delivery access improvements appear more modest in percentage terms than the gain in workforce access, which is mostly due to the larger scale of delivery markets and the complimentary role of the ADHS with national highway networks for longer distance trips.

A recent traffic study performed for NCDOT on the Improve Existing Alternative showed that the proposed project will improve both the average travel time along the corridor as well as the travel time reliability of the corridor. The proposed project is expected to improve the average travel times during the AM period by 3.0% in the westbound direction and 4.5% in the eastbound direction. During the PM period the average travel times along the corridor improve by 10.7% in the westbound direction and 6.8% in the eastbound direction. The reduction in travel time will reduce the total amount of greenhouse gas emissions produced by the transport of people and freight. It is estimated that the discounted emission reduction benefits total 7%.

Enhancing NHS connectivity in local areas works towards establishing the ADHS as a



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regional highway foundation for a strategic network of Intermodal Corridor of Commerce. This balanced system of interconnected highway, rail, and inland waterway corridors is Appalachia's direct connection to both domestic and international markets. *Continuing Corridor K* connects Graham County to rail lines in Sylva and destinations to the north, Chattanooga to the west and the I-26 corridor which accesses the ports of South Carolina and North Carolina.

#### Quality of Life

Graham County is the third-least populous county in North Carolina yet has the highest economic deprivation rate. Graham County historically has maintained a high unemployment rate. According to the North Carolina Department of Commerce, the unemployment rate for Graham County in 2021 was 6.9% compared to an unemployment rate of 4.8% for North Carolina. Over two-thirds of Graham County is owned by the US Forest Service (USFS), severely limiting opportunities for development. Graham County is a member of the Mountain West Partnership which advocates for economic development in western North Carolina and assisted with the development of Balsam West Fiber in Robbinsville. The Town of Robbinsville has been selected to participate in the Downtown Strong Initiative of the NC Main Street and Rural Planning Center, which provides economic and revitalization support. *Continuing Corridor K* is another step towards lessening that deprivation rate while providing reliable roadway facilities.

According to the Graham County CTP, 67% of employed Graham County residents commute to jobs outside of the county. Additionally, 1,000 plus jobs in the county are filled by workers that commute in from other counties, mostly Cherokee County. The

impaired mobility and constrained freight movement due to a combination of steep grades, tight curves, and heavy vehicles is an issue. The impaired mobility of the existing highway network impacts emergency medical service response times resulting in the loss of life.

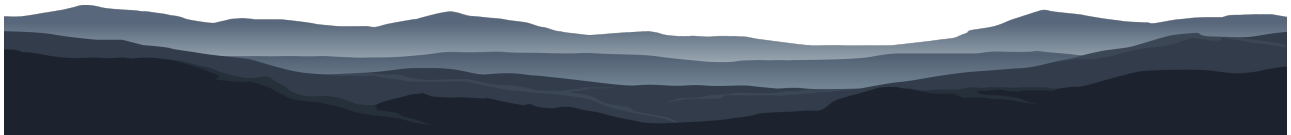
The project will provide safe and expanded access to essential services for commuters, truckers, public transportation services, and families in search of groceries, health care, higher education opportunities, and emergency services in this historically low employment region.

#### Innovation

Innovation has been an important aspect of The Project throughout the planning and right of way phases and will continue through construction. Some examples of innovative techniques and technologies are below.

The Department utilized an innovative corridor planning software known as Quantm during the planning and feasibility stage of The Project. Quantm created 3D models of the study area to help guide potential alignments that would avoid hot spots and unrealistic geometry.

An advanced survey technology, ground penetrating radar (GPR), was used to better-understand the study area of the project. This software, traditionally used to identify septic systems, specifically identified potential areas that may serve as archaeologically significant to the EBCI tribe or include an ecological anomaly that would need to be avoided during construction. These two innovative technologies resulted in significant cost-savings and reduced impacts to the environment and the community.



The land bridge over NC 143 also poses many opportunities for innovation. In order to serve users of the ANST, The Project will need to keep pedestrian access open 24/7 throughout construction. As part of the construction, the contractor will submit a plan to backfilling the land bridge that will not negatively impact the ANST, travelers or USFS property.

### III. Discretionary Criteria

#### Project Readiness

##### Environmental Risk

NCDOT has completed the environmental review process for Continuing Corridor K, outside of the ongoing Section 106 programmatic agreement that will continue through construction. The purpose of the programmatic agreement is to ensure that environmental justice is still followed if the project were to encounter any unknowns that could impact the environment or community during construction.

##### Technical Capacity

NCDOT has a long history of successfully delivering federally funded projects including TIGER/BUILD and INFRA awards and complying with USDOT regulations.

##### Financial Capacity

The Department will use ADHS funds to support the remainder of the project. In the event of additional cost overages, the project would be covered with State funds.

#### Project Schedule

Section	Let Date
A-0009CA	August 16, 2022
A-0009CB	September 20, 2022
A-0009CC	November 15, 2022
A-0009CD	October 17, 2023*

Table 2: Project Schedule

\*Date assumes award of NSFLTP Grant

The estimated completion date for all four sections in December 2027.

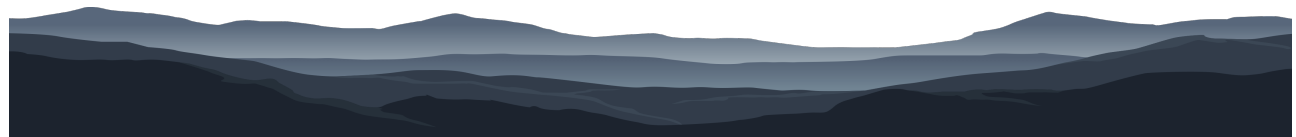
*Continuing Corridor K: Connecting People, Goods and Services* will meet the obligation period of September 30, 2025. NCDOT has awarded contracts for sections CA and CB. Section CC is currently advertised and section CD is expected to be let in October 2023.

#### Project Risks

Construction projects in this part of the State run the risk of encountering certain natural obstacles due to the diverse terrain, natural habitat, geology, and potential for archaeological sites. The Department has mitigated this risk through the use of the Quantm software discussed in the Innovation section, a pedestrian safety plan for 24/7 pedestrian access for the ANST in section CB contract, and finally through including project specific special provisions to address geological mitigation.

#### Community Impact

***Continuing Corridor K is located in an underserved community, as defined in EO 13985.*** As discussed in greater detail in the Transportation Challenge and Statutory Criteria sections, the Project specifically serves a rural area that is partially in Native American Reservation Territory, that is experiencing a higher-than-average poverty rate and limited access to jobs, healthcare, and many other resources. NCDOT has made significant efforts to involve and



consider the impacts to the community and environment throughout their planning process and in their preferred alternative. The level of partnership and environmental consideration is so monumental, that the Department received the 2021 National Environmental Excellence Award for Environmental Management, Stewardship, Conservation and/or Protection from the National Association of Environmental Professionals.

### Environmental Justice and Climate Action

Environmental Justice and climate considerations, including greenhouse gas (GHG) emissions, were a significant part of both the planning process and the proposed scope of the project.

HOT SPOTS IDENTIFIED BY CORRIDOR K FOCUS GROUP IN REGIONAL "OPT-IN" STUDY (NOVEMBER 2014)

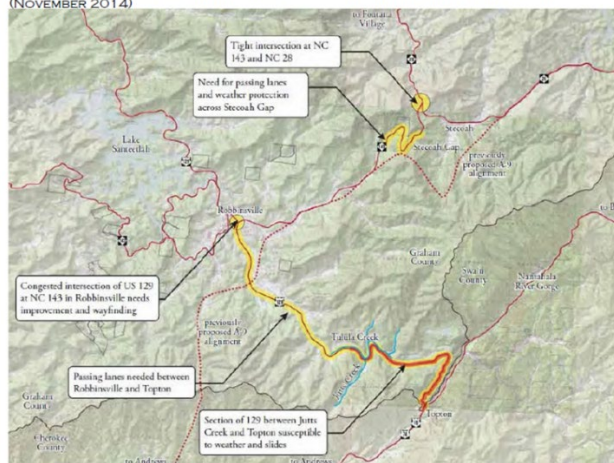
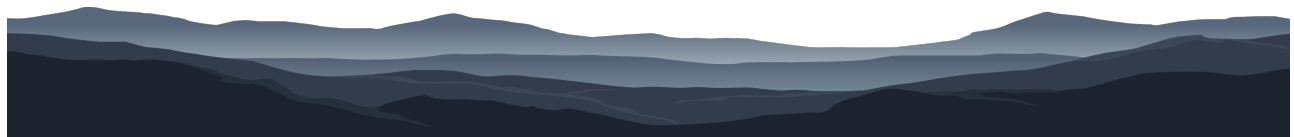


Figure 3 illustrates Hot Spots identified along the corridor by a regional economic development study

The preliminary engineering phase of Project A-0009C took a more Planning Environmental Linkages (PEL) approach to project development prior to entering a more traditional NEPA phase. This approach coined a “Fresh Start” to project development allowed stakeholders from various aspects of the project to have an equal voice during the planning phase. One aspect of the “Fresh Start” was to engage Tribal Partners early and

often in the planning phase. The engagement of the five Tribal Partners is important not only from potential impacts associated with the Trail of Tears but also the potential right-of-way impacts to Tribal lands. Relocations along the corridor and particularly for Tribal Lands is difficult if not impossible to accomplish. The “Fresh Start” approach to project delivery allowed the project team to explore many ideas in a controlled environment.

Since 2015, the project has gained momentum and strength from fostering strong partnerships. The A-0009C Project Team consists of representatives from FHWA, NCDOT leadership and subject matter experts, Federal and State permitting agencies, Appalachian Regional Commission (ARC), Southwestern Rural Planning Organization, Appalachian Trail Conservancy, Graham and Cherokee County Commissioners and County Managers, and Graham County Economic Development Director. NCDOT worked closely with Cherokee, Graham, and Swain Counties to garner ideas and address local concerns during project development. NCDOT also worked with FHWA to involve five tribal partners including Muscogee Creek Nation, Catawba Indian Nation, Cherokee Nation, Eastern Band of Cherokee Indians, and United Keetoowah Band of Cherokee Indians. Additionally, NCDOT has fostered partnerships with several environmental advocacy groups including the Southern Environmental Law Center, WaysSouth, and Mountain True. Over the last five years, coordination efforts have resulted in the inclusion of pedestrian accommodations in Robbinville and a pedestrian bridge at the ANST. These coordination efforts have assisted in the successful delivery of a project alignment that not only meets the purpose and need of the project but is sensitive to the





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cultural, natural, and human environment that is uniquely Graham County.

The project area includes a wide range of environmental features such as streams, wetlands, and sensitive terrestrial communities. For the Improve Existing Alternative, the project avoids adverse environmental impacts to air and water quality, wetlands, and endangered species. According to the Natural Resources Technical Report prepared for Project A-0009C, there are 22 potential jurisdictional streams, 11 surface waters, and 76 potential jurisdictional wetlands within the project study area. The Future Land Use Study Area (FLUSA) is larger than the natural resources project study area. The streams and associated branches within the FLUSA include twenty-five 305(b) streams, 5 trout waters, 100 public mountain trout waters, 9 trout streams, and 50 USACE western NC waters.

#### Increasing Opportunity

The focus on increasing opportunity and advancing racial equity has been foundational to The Project and serves the very purpose and need of Corridor K and the ADHS. Through improving travel reliability along the corridor, the project is specifically reducing the barriers to opportunity that many low-income and Native Americans face currently. The land bridge over NC 143 is a physical representation of how the project mitigates barriers to opportunity, and also emphasizes the importance of public involvement for The Project -as the land bridge was initially proposed by the public and environmental advocacy groups. The Department has made significant efforts to ensure The Project supports racial equity. For example, the Department reduced the amount of right-of-way taken from a landowner on Tribal property to

accommodate an existing mobile home on the premises, being sensitive to the limited amount of suitable replacement housing in the County or on the Tribal territory.



Figure 4 illustrates a rendering of the proposed land bridge over NC 143

#### Workforce Development, Job Quality, and Workforce Equity

The Department is focused on increasing the economic benefits for the community through this transportation project. The project A-0009C was specifically split into sections A-0009CA, CB, CC and CD so that local and regional contractors and subcontractors could bid on the project. As part of the bidding process, NCDOT includes strong labor standards and incentives for construction firms that offer apprenticeships.

#### IV. Conclusion

The *Continuing Corridor K: Connecting People, Goods, and Services* project has been in the making by NCDOT for nearly 60 years. In this final stretch, the Nationally Significant Federal Lands and Tribal Projects Grant will allow the Department to deliver the much-needed benefits of The Project to Western North Carolina. The Project will address longstanding safety and travel-time reliability issues along the corridor while focusing on equity, environmental stewardship, and economic development.

