

a program of Land of Sky

FRENCH BROAD RIVER

METROPOLITAN PLANNING ORGANIZATION

August 17, 2023

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

Dear Secretary Buttigieg,

I would like to express my strong support for the North Carolina Department of Transportation's (NCDOT's) Promoting Resilient Operations for Transformative, Efficient, and Cost-Saving Transportation (PROTECT) Program Grant application titled BLUE RIDGE (Bridge Longevity Upgrades to Enhance Resiliency, Increase Dependability, and Grow Equity) for the rehabilitation or replacement of five structures in Buncombe and Madison Counties.

These structures serve as critical connections for rural communities and residents to vital services such as employment hubs, educational institutions, and medical centers. Each structure is in critical need of rehabilitation or replacement due to reoccurring natural hazards such as flooding caused by climate change. Major structure improvements are necessary to increase the resiliency of the region, restore the natural environment, and ensure necessary accessibility to vital community services.

Should any bridge need to be closed due to its structural deficiencies or impacts from flood events, there are very few viable detour options to ensure continued access. The detours for these bridges are not all suitable for truck traffic, contain functionally obsolete bridges, and increase travel distance by an average 17 miles. This would significantly impact the nearby communities due to increased travel times and decreased access to vital services.

Western North Carolina and the French Broad River MPO's transportation network is constrained by the Appalachian Mountains as well as numerous rivers and streams, leading to a network with limited redundancy and connectivity. Many communities throughout the region rely on single or limited access points. With increasing extreme weather events impacting our region, these communities are at an elevated risk of being isolated in the event of weather- or other- events. Providing more resilient infrastructure is key to adapting our region to increasing natural challenges.

As a regional transportation priority, the improvements to the five structures will provide reliable connectivity and increase the resiliency of the surrounding communities and the region, while repairing the surrounding natural environments. Thank you for your favorable consideration of this important project.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'AS', followed by a long horizontal flourish that extends to the right.

Anthony Sutton
Chair, French Broad River MPO Board

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[August 17, 2023]

The Honorable Pete Buttigieg
Secretary, US Department of Transportation
1200 New Jersey Avenue, SE
Washington, D.C. 20590

Subject: Letter of Support for North Carolina Department of Transportation Multimodal Project Rural Discretionary Grant Application, I-26 Interchange Project

Dear Secretary Buttigieg,

Please accept this letter as French Broad River Metropolitan Planning Organization's strong support for the North Carolina Department of Transportation Multimodal Project Discretionary Grant application for the subject project. This project includes a new interchange on I-26 (future Exit 35) and connecting road to NC 191, approximately six miles south of Asheville. This transportation investment capitalizes on private investments and will fulfill priority regional priorities: access to long-term, high-quality jobs, access to federal, state and county recreational resources, and reduced congestion and commuting times within the Asheville/Hendersonville corridor.

The North Carolina Department of Transportation has shown that this project is crucial. By supporting the investment by Pratt & Whitney, a division of Raytheon, Inc, in southern Buncombe County, the USDOT Rural Grant would contribute to the creation of 800 jobs with an average salary of \$68,000, \$39,000 higher than the current median income.

Further, Pratt & Whitney is partnering with Asheville-Buncombe Technical Community College to train the highly skilled workforce. A new 20,000-square-foot educational facility near the manufacturing plant will increase the region's educational capacity and technical knowledge. This education partnership will eliminate barriers to opportunities and continue to enhance racial equity in the region.

The interchange project on I-26, HE-0001, is programmed in the MPO's 2045 Metropolitan Transportation Plan and is critical to help alleviate the projected impacts of the new development along the corridor, enable freight access, and provide improved connectivity to our region.

Thank you, Mr. Secretary, for considering this strategic investment. It demonstrates how a federal-state-local partnership can greatly impact a region's economic vibrancy and transportation mobility.

USDOT staff should feel free to contact me to discuss our support for the project.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'AS', with a long horizontal stroke extending to the right.

Anthony Sutton
Board Chair
French Broad River MPO