



850 Main Campus Drive, Suite 105 | Raleigh, NC 27695

August 14, 2023

The Honorable Pete Buttigieg
Secretary of Transportation
US Department of Transportation
1200 New Jersey Avenue, S.E.
Washington, DC 20590

Dear Secretary Buttigieg,

Please accept this letter of support for the **Solving Access for NC 12 in Dare County (SAND, or “the Project”)** application to the USDOT’s 2023 PROTECT Grant program. This collaborative project, spearheaded by the North Carolina Department of Transportation (NCDOT) with support from project partners US Fish and Wildlife Service and National Park Service, will undertake a Planning and Environmental Linkages (PEL) study. This study will establish a solid foundation for a streamlined National Environmental Policy Act (NEPA) process, permitting, and construction, with the goal of securing the long-term resiliency of NC 12 in the Outer Banks of North Carolina.

SAND is requesting PROTECT funding to perform comprehensive resiliency planning, alternatives development and evaluation, and extensive public and stakeholder engagement for an 11-mile section of NC 12 between Oregon Inlet and Rodanthe in Dare County, North Carolina. This stretch of NC 12 is vital to the safety, quality of life, and economy of the Outer Banks. It is a critical lifeline connecting residents, tourists, and property owners in Hatteras Island to the rest of Dare County and mainland North Carolina. Moreover, it traverses areas with substantial ecological and recreational value in the Cape Hatteras National Seashore and Pea Island National Wildlife Refuge, which provide recreational opportunities, while conserving a diverse array of habitats that support migratory waterfowl and endangered species like the loggerhead sea turtle.

Storms, ocean currents, and wave and wind action are continually and dynamically reshaping the low-lying barrier islands that NC 12 traverses. Rising sea levels, coupled with the increasing severity and frequency of coastal storms are accelerating the impacts of these forces, leading to flooding, shoreline erosion, and sand and ocean overwash that damages the roadway and causes extensive repair and cleanup costs. Since 2010, NCDOT has spent more than \$72 million to keep NC 12 south of Oregon Inlet passable following storm events. These persistent challenges disrupt the lives of residents and visitors, negatively impact the Cape Hatteras

Mailing address: NC State University | Box 8605 | Raleigh, NC 27695

Telephone: 919-515-2454 | Fax: 919-515-7095

ncseagrant.org



850 Main Campus Drive, Suite 105 | Raleigh, NC 27695

National Seashore and the Pea Island Wildlife Refuge, and lead to negative impacts on the regional economy.

To address these concerns, SAND will build upon prior decision-making and environmental analyses for phases I, IIa, and IIb of State Transportation Improvement Program project B-2500 and the efforts of the NC 12 Task Force to identify the range of reasonable alternatives for subsequent NEPA evaluation and support the identification of a preferred alternative. The Project will perform environmental screening and develop conceptual roadway and structure design for these alternatives, including preliminary hydraulic modeling, to understand their cost, constructability, and environmental impacts. Resiliency and mitigation planning will also be a key focus, and the Project will identify opportunities to incorporate innovative strategies such as oyster reef restoration and nature-based solutions for stormwater management. SAND will also identify permitting and resource needs required for successful implementation. Robust public and stakeholder engagement will occur throughout the project, ensuring that all diverse perspectives are considered in the decision-making process. These project elements will address vulnerabilities at projected future breach locations as well as the Canal Zone and Pea Island Visitor Center Hot Spots. At these locations, rising tides are breaching dunes, and sand and ocean overwash are a major challenge during and after coastal storms.

NC Sea Grant is supportive of this project, as it proposes to build partnerships and prioritize stakeholder engagement as we continue working to build more resilient coastal communities and ecosystems in our state. NC Sea Grant provides research, education, and outreach opportunities related to current issues affecting the NC coastal and its communities. This project proposal is very timely as coastal communities in NC are facing many challenges in protecting coastal resources and ecosystems from the continued impacts of climate change. Further, many of our communities facing the greatest risks from climate change often have the least resources to address these challenges. We are pleased to see the investment and interest in building resilience in coastal NC, and in the Outer Banks region specifically, which is vital to the economic, environmental and cultural fabric of coastal NC.

SAND will bring together Federal and state agencies, local communities, academia, and advocacy groups to build a common framework for decision-making and advance the development of long-term solutions to enhance the resilience of this critical transportation link. Thank you for your consideration of the SAND grant application for funding through the PROTECT program.

Mailing address: NC State University | Box 8605 | Raleigh, NC 27695
Telephone: 919-515-2454 | Fax: 919-515-7095
ncseagrant.org



850 Main Campus Drive, Suite 105 | Raleigh, NC 27695

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in blue ink that reads "Sarah Spiegler".

Sarah Spiegler, NCSG Coastal Resilience Specialist
sespiegl@ncsu.edu

A handwritten signature in blue ink that reads "Cayla Cothron".

Cayla Cothron, NCSG Coastal Planning Specialist
cdcothro@ncsu.edu

A handwritten signature in blue ink that reads "Frank Lopez".

Frank Lopez, NCSG Extension Director
fmlopez@ncsu.edu