



Roy Cooper  
Governor

D. Reid Wilson  
Secretary, Department of Natural and Cultural Resources

Will Summer  
Division of Land and Water Stewardship  
Executive Director, NC Land and Water Fund

August 9, 2023

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

Dear Secretary Buttigieg,

The Solving Access for NC 12 in Dare County (SAND, or “the Project”) application to the USDOT’s 2023 PROTECT Grant program will help support the mission of North Carolina’s Natural Heritage 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 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.

North Carolina’s Natural Heritage Program maintains an inventory of biodiversity and maps of nature preserves throughout the state. Natural Heritage records indicate this area is of exceptional significance for Green Sea Turtle (US and NC Threatened), Salt-meadow Grass (NC Endangered), Little-spike Spikerush (NC Threatened), Winged Seedbox (NC Rare), Southern Sundrops (NC Rare), Slender Sea-purslane (NC Endangered), and Moundlily Yucca (NC Rare), as well as the Maritime Dry Grassland natural community. Many additional rare species and high quality natural communities are also found in this area. In addition, a large number of public land conservation organizations contribute to land and restoration efforts in close proximity to NC 12 in this area, including NC Department of Transportation Mitigation Sites, Pea Island National Wildlife Refuge and Pea Island NWR Registered Heritage Area, NC Mountains-to-Sea Trail, and USFWS Critical Habitat for Piping Plover.

Storms, ocean currents, and wave and wind action are continually and dynamically reshaping the low-lying barrier islands near NC 12. 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. 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. Public and stakeholder engagement will occur throughout the project, to ensure that 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.

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.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "Misty Buchanan". The signature is written in a cursive, flowing style.

Misty Buchanan,  
Deputy Director for Natural Heritage