



August, 14, 2023

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

## **RE: SOLVING ACCESS FOR NC 12 IN DARE COUNTY (SAND)**

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 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.

The South Atlantic Salt Marsh Initiative (SASMI) brings together leaders from four states (NC, SC, GA, FL) to identify the most significant threats and opportunities to conserve the approximately 1 million acres of salt marsh that extend throughout the South Atlantic region. The SASMI Plan, entitled *Marsh Forward: A Regional Plan for the Future of the South Atlantic Coast's Million-Acre Salt Marsh Ecosystem*, outlines key strategies, objectives, and actions to achieve a goal to enhance the long-term abundance, health, and resilience of the approximately 1 million acres of salt marshes within the South Atlantic states.

SAND will help meet the SASMI's 1 million acre goal by implementing adaptation measures outlined in the SASMI Plan, including the installation of natural and nature-based features, such as oyster reefs, which serve to fortify vulnerable areas of marshes. SAND's focus on resiliency and mitigation planning likewise supports SASMI's intent to complement and build on the independent efforts of local communities, military installations, and sentinel landscapes to enhance their resilience in the face of climate change. Finally, by bringing 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, SAND will strengthen connections and increase engagement with this network of North Carolina stakeholders and enhance SASMI's own capacity building efforts.

SASMI thanks you for considering this letter of support for the Solving Access for NC 12 in Dare County project. We look forward to supporting this work through continued collaboration with NCDOT, USFWS, NPS, and the more than 300 diverse stakeholders of the SASMI Coalition to protect, restore and enhance the health and resiliency of salt marsh along the U.S. South Atlantic Coast.

Sincerely,

Amanda Gobeli, Coordinator

South Atlantic Salt Marsh Initiative

