

Ben Cahoon
Mayor

Michael Siers
Mayor Pro Tem

Andy Garman
Town Manager



Town of Nags Head
Post Office Box 99
Nags Head, NC 27959
Telephone 252-441-5508
Fax 252-441-0776
www.nagsheadnc.gov

M. Renée Cahoon
Commissioner

Kevin Brinkley
Commissioner

Bob Sanders
Commissioner

August 8, 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 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.

Located in Dare County, the Town of Nags Head serves as the gateway to the section of NC 12 between Oregon Inlet and Rodanthe and the Cape Hatteras National Seashore. Nags Head is a unique, coastal community built upon a legacy rooted in shared values, including our most recognized common bond - a love for the Outer Banks. We strive to preserve and protect the environment, tourism-based economy, and sense of place in order to ensure a memorable family vacation experience for present and future generations. Throughout its history, the town has been visionary in dealing with and planning for complex coastal issues including transportation and shoreline management in order to improve its resilience. Resilience means our community will be better able to withstand, respond to, and recover rapidly from disruptions due to hazards without long-term damage to our economy or environment. It means we will ideally require less government and private funding to recover, rebuild, and redevelop after a hazard occurs. Sustaining natural systems improves resilience by providing ecosystems services that directly or indirectly support our community's survival and quality of life. This encompasses planning for future impacts of sea level rise and ensuring proper practices are in place to sustain the natural environment and maintain a viable family, tourism-based economy.

Through time, Nags Head's desire to be a family beach community has not deviated. At the core of these desires are a healthy, well-maintained oceanfront beach that is both visually and physically accessible. The town recognizes the value of our coastal ecosystem and the role it plays in making the Outer Banks a great place to live, work, and visit. We uphold our legacy by protecting and promoting a sustainable local economy based on family vacation tourism and a high-quality beach experience. Fundamental to our legacy and quality of life is ensuring access to a well-protected natural coastal environment. Our ocean and estuarine shorelines need to be carefully managed in order to preserve the natural and beneficial functions of the environment while balancing the need to respect private property rights and public access.

The Town's strategic direction includes facilitating collaboration to address community wide regional issues and make progress on threatening issues for the community such as shoreline management. This grant aligns with the town's goals and would build upon the progress that has been made to protect our critical resources. In order to ensure the long-term viability and health of the ecosystem and economic vitality of the Outer Banks, the Town of Nags Head proudly supports this grant application.

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 "Andy Garman". The signature is written in a cursive style with a long, sweeping tail on the "n" of "Garman".

Andy Garman
Town Manager
Town of Nags Head