



United States Department of the Interior

OFFICE OF THE SECRETARY
Washington, DC 20240

The Honorable Pete Buttigieg
Secretary of Transportation
Washington, DC 20590

Dear Mr. Secretary:

I write to convey the Department of the Interior's (DOI) support for the North Carolina Department of Transportation's (NCDOT's) application for a planning grant for the Solving Access for NC 12 in Dare County project (SAND or Project) under the Promoting Resilient Operations for Transformative, Efficient, and Cost-Saving Transportation (PROTECT) Discretionary Grant Program fiscal year 2022 - 2023 funding opportunity.

This collaborative Project is spearheaded by the NCDOT and supported by the National Park Service (NPS) and the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service (FWS). The PROTECT grant would fund a Planning and Environmental Linkages study to perform comprehensive climate change resiliency planning, develop and evaluate alternatives, and conduct extensive public and stakeholder engagement for an 11-mile section of North Carolina State Highway 12 (NC 12) in the Outer Banks of 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 to the rest of Dare County and mainland North Carolina. 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 and increasing severity and frequency of coastal storms accelerates the impacts of these forces, leading to flooding, shoreline erosion, and sand and ocean over wash that damage the roadway and cause frequent closures, extensive repairs, and substantial cleanup costs. Storm events inhibit visitor access to Cape Hatteras National Seashore (the park) and Pea Island National Wildlife Refuge (the wildlife refuge). The NC 12 roadway itself has a negative impact on the ecology of the park and the wildlife refuge, obstructing the natural flow of water and movement of dunes which in turn reduces the quality of the ecosystem and its ability to support migratory waterfowl and endangered species.

SAND will focus on "hot spots" where dune breaches and sand and ocean over wash present the greatest challenge for sustainability of the roadway in the context of climate change, and which present the greatest opportunity for providing long-term resident and visitor access while restoring the ecosystem. The Project will include development of conceptual roadway and structure design alternatives, preliminary hydraulic modeling, cost-benefit analysis, constructability considerations, and a preliminary analysis of environmental impacts. Climate change resiliency, ecosystem restoration, and mitigation planning are key components of this

effort. SAND will bring together Federal and State agencies, local communities, academia, and other stakeholders 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.

This project is a priority for the DOI, and I urge your favorable consideration of the PROTECT planning grant request for the SAND project. If you need more information, please contact Michael Caldwell, NPS, Associate Director, Park Planning, Facilities and Lands, at mike_caldwell@nps.gov or (202) 308-2652, or Cynthia Martinez, FWS, Chief, National Wildlife Refuge System, at cynthia_martinez@fws.gov or (202) 208-4889.

Sincerely,

Shannon A. Estenoz
Assistant Secretary
for Fish and Wildlife and Parks