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Whiteville, NC 28472
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The Honorable Sean Duffy
Secretary, U.S. Department of Transportation
1200 New Jersey Avenue, S.E.
Washington, DC 20590

Whiteville, October 5, 2026

Re: Madison Street Bridge Expansion Project - Promoting Resilient Operations for Transformative, Efficient, and Cost-saving Transportation (PROTECT) Grant Application

Dear Secretary Duffy:

Patou, LLC, dba Sophie's Café-Bistro, would like to express the strong support of for the North Carolina Department of Transportation's Madison Street Bridge Expansion project in the City of Whiteville, Columbus County, North Carolina. The project will improve the Madison Street (US 701 Business) crossing over Soules Swamp by extending the existing bridge and adding a second bridge. These improvements will help the roadway to better handle heavy rainfall and flooding events, keeping this important connection open for residents, businesses, emergency responders and travelers.

Flooding is a recurring issue along Madison Street and throughout downtown Whiteville during heavy rainfall events. Improving the bridge crossing would reduce flooding in the area and allow rainwater to recede more quickly after heavy rainfall events. As a result, the project would help reduce road closures, improve access to downtown Whiteville, and provide more reliable travel for all roadway users during and after heavy rainfall events.

Specifically, for **Sophie's Café-Bistro**, the importance of the Madison Street Bridge Expansion project can be summarized by the following:

- **US 701 Business/Madison Street is essential to Sophie's Café-Bistro.** Our customers come from Whiteville and the surrounding communities, and many of them depend on this road to reach us. It is also an important route for our food and supply deliveries. When flooding makes the road difficult or impossible to use, customers stay home, deliveries are delayed, and a small business like ours immediately feels the financial impact. Even when the water recedes, the disruption can continue for days.
- **We have reached the point where preparing for flooding has become part of our normal business routine.** We keep sandbags readily available near our entrances because we know that another significant storm can quickly turn into another threat to our business. Having them there every day is more than a practical precaution—it is a constant reminder of how vulnerable our downtown businesses remain.

- **A project that addresses the underlying causes of flooding would give us something we have not had in a long time: confidence in the future.** We can prepare for a storm, but we cannot prepare indefinitely for repeated disruptions, closures, property damage, and lost business. Meaningful flood mitigation would allow us to spend less time worrying about how we will get through the next storm and more time focusing on growing our business and serving our community.
- **Sophie's Café Bistro is a small business, but we are an important part of the local business community.** We employ seven people and provide a place where neighbors, families, visitors, and local professionals can gather for a meal, a cup of coffee, or simply a conversation. Like many small businesses in Whiteville, our success is closely tied to the health and accessibility of downtown. Protecting the roads and infrastructure that connect us to our customers is therefore not simply an investment in a bridge or a flood-control project—it is an investment in the businesses, jobs, and community that depend on them.
- **The financial aftermath of each flood is becoming increasingly difficult to absorb.** In addition to the damage and business interruption itself, we repeatedly find ourselves fighting with insurance companies over coverage and reimbursement, with insurers looking for ways to limit or avoid paying for losses that we believe are directly related to flooding. The costs associated with each major flood are substantial, and after absorbing loss after loss, we have to be honest about how long a small business can continue operating under these circumstances. We are resilient, but resilience is not unlimited. Without meaningful action to reduce the flooding itself, we fear that eventually the financial burden will become more than we can survive.

The Madison Street Bridge Expansion project represents a strategic investment in transportation resilience, mobility, public safety, and long-term vitality of downtown Whiteville and Columbus County as a region. I respectfully urge your full consideration and support for funding that will allow North Carolina DOT to advance and complete this important project, providing lasting benefits to the City of Whiteville, Columbus County, and southeastern North Carolina.

Thank you for your consideration of this meritorious grant and your commitment to our nation's critical transportation system.

Sincerely,

Guillaume Slama

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