

a program of Land of Sky

FRENCH BROAD RIVER

METROPOLITAN PLANNING ORGANIZATION

The Honorable Sean Duffy
U.S. Secretary of Transportation
United States Department of Transportation
1200 New Jersey Avenue SE
Washington, DC 20590

Dear Secretary Duffy:

On behalf of the French Broad River Metropolitan Planning Organization (FBRMPO), I am writing to express our strong support for the North Carolina Department of Transportation's **Howard Gap Road: Resilience After Landslides Project** and its application for funding through the U.S. Department of Transportation's Promoting Resilient Operations for Transformative, Efficient, and Cost-Saving Transportation (PROTECT) Program.

Howard Gap Road provides an important connection between communities in Polk County and the surrounding region. A section of the roadway has remained closed following recurring slope and roadway failures in 2018 and 2019, requiring affected travelers to use a 16-mile detour that adds approximately 30 minutes to some trips. The closure has also reduced access to homes, emergency services, utilities, businesses, and other essential destinations.

The need to restore this connection has become even more significant following Hurricane Helene, which caused widespread damage throughout Western North Carolina in September 2024, including extensive damage to U.S. 176 between Saluda and Tryon. With U.S. 176 closed during reconstruction, I-26 is currently serving as the primary regional connection between these communities. In this context, restoring Howard Gap Road would provide valuable network redundancy and an additional route within a transportation system that has experienced significant disruptions from extreme weather events.

The proposed project would improve the long-term resilience and reliability of Howard Gap Road through roadway reconstruction, slope stabilization, retaining infrastructure, and drainage improvements designed to address the conditions that contributed to previous failures. Reopening the roadway would restore an existing transportation connection that

French Broad River Metropolitan Planning Organization

339 New Leicester Highway, Suite 140 • Asheville, NC 28806 • 828-251-6622

mpo@landofsky.org • frenchbroadrivermpo.org

a program of Land of Sky

FRENCH BROAD RIVER

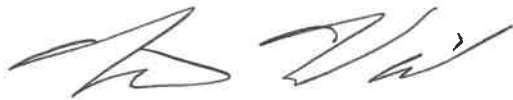
METROPOLITAN PLANNING ORGANIZATION

has been unavailable since 2019, reduce travel burdens associated with the current detour, improve access for emergency and utility services, and provide greater flexibility within the regional transportation network.

As the Metropolitan Planning Organization responsible for coordinating transportation planning and investment across the French Broad River region, FBRMPO recognizes the importance of transportation system resilience and network redundancy, particularly in a region that has experienced significant impacts from flooding, landslides, and other extreme weather events. Projects such as the Howard Gap Road improvements demonstrate how targeted investments in existing infrastructure can strengthen the reliability of the broader transportation network and improve the ability of communities to maintain access during and following disruptive events.

For these reasons, the French Broad River Metropolitan Planning Organization strongly supports the **Howard Gap Road: Resilience After Landslides Project** and NCDOT's application for federal PROTECT Resilience Improvement Grant funding. We respectfully encourage the U.S. Department of Transportation to support this important investment in transportation resilience and connectivity in Western North Carolina.

Respectfully,



Tristan Winkler

Director

French Broad River Metropolitan Planning Organization

French Broad River Metropolitan Planning Organization

339 New Leicester Highway, Suite 140 • Asheville, NC 28806 • 828-251-6622

mpo@landofsky.org • frenchbroadrivermpo.org