County of Ashe

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

Dear Secretary Duffy:

On behalf of Ashe County Emergency Management, I am pleased to express our strong support for North Carolina Department of Transportation (NCDOT)'s **NC 88 Mountain Corridor Resilience and Stabilization Project** ("the Project"), submitted to the U.S. Department of Transportation's FY 2024-2026 Promoting Resilient Operations for Transformative, Efficient, and Cost-saving Transportation (PROTECT) Grant Program.

The Project will modernize and fortify a highly vulnerable 3.76-mile mountainous section of NC 88 stretching from the NC 194 intersection in Smethport to the NC 194/NW School Road intersection in Warrensville. Located in the flood-prone Blue Ridge Mountain region, this critical corridor suffers from sharp curves and severe structural vulnerabilities to flooding along Buffalo Creek. The proposed project will replace two critically at-risk bridges over Buffalo Creek which were built in 1949 and are now rated as in poor condition (4 out of 10). The Project will also implement curve realignments, construct systemic drainage improvements, and add 5-foot paved shoulders along with a modern roundabout.

The NC 88 corridor serves as a primary logistics, economic, and emergency service spine for northern Ashe County. It serves rural residents, agricultural commerce, and local school bus routing. However, the existing infrastructure is not equipped to handle the intensified, severe weather events impacting the Appalachian high country. This was evidenced during Hurricane Helene, when full and partial closures of the roadway reduced the redundancy and reliability of the emergency transportation network serving the community. In rural mountainous areas, where alternate routes are limited, the loss or degradation of this primary transportation corridor could substantially increase emergency response times and create additional operational risks for both responders and the public. Widening the road, improving the horizontal alignment and providing paved shoulders will improve safety. The project also involves numerous rock cuts with soil nail walls that will stabilize the mountains above the road.

For Ashe County Emergency Management and our partner emergency service agencies, the reliability of NC 88 is directly tied to our ability to protect lives and property. Emergency calls in the northern portion of the county routinely require coordinated response from fire departments, EMS, rescue squads, law enforcement, and emergency management personnel, many of whom must travel this corridor to reach residents and critical facilities. During Hurricane Helene and other severe weather events, flooding, slope instability, roadway damage, and closures along NC 88 have significantly constrained those response operations and reduced the availability of dependable alternate routes. When a primary route is compromised in a mountainous, rural area, emergency responders can face longer travel distances, delayed access, and increased operational hazards at the very time when rapid response is most critical. Strengthening this corridor will provide Ashe County's emergency services with a safer and more reliable transportation route, improve response and evacuation capabilities, and enhance the county's overall resilience to future flooding, landslides, and severe weather events.

Thank you for your consideration of NCDOT's PROTECT grant application, which will transition a crucial rural artery into a storm-resilient corridor engineered to withstand severe inland precipitation and safeguard mountainous supply lines.

Sincerely,
Patty Gambill

Patty Gambill,
Director