NC RURAL CENTER

October 2, 2026

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 the NC Rural Center, 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

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improve safety. The project also involves numerous rock cuts with soil nail walls that will stabilize the mountains above the road.

The NC Rural Center plays a vital role in strengthening economic opportunity across rural North Carolina by supporting infrastructure that connects markets, businesses, governments, farms, and households to each other. Safe and reliable roadways are especially critical for business and rural economies, which serve as a backbone of rural supply chains—moving agricultural products, timber, manufactured goods, and other locally produced commodities to distribution hubs and consumers. Approval of NCDOT's PROTECT grant application will ensure a critical stretch of the NC 88 corridor that connects a vital rural region in the northwest corner of North Carolina.

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,

Patrick N. Woodie

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President & CEO

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