577 George Wilson Road
PO Box 1937
Boone, NC 28607

July 9, 2021

Secretary Pete Buttigieg
U.S. Department of Transportation
1200 New Jersey Avenue, SE
Washington, DC, 20590

Subject: Letter of Support 2021 RAISE Grant Application:

Fixing LOw Water Bridges for Emergency, Transportation, Technology, Equity, and Resilience ("FLOW BETTER") Project

Dear Secretary Buttigieg,

Please accept this letter of support for the North Carolina Department of Transportation's (NCDOT's) *Fixing LOw Water Bridges for Emergency, Transportation, Technology, Equity, and Resilience* Project ("FLOW BETTER" or "the Project" hereafter) application to the U.S. Department of Transportation's RAISE Program. The FLOW BETTER Project is the result of a thoughtful and coordinated strategy to improve access, economic competitiveness, safety, equity, and infrastructure resilience in rural western North Carolina. The Project will bring 26 low water bridges and 2 concrete deck bridges in Avery, Ashe, Alleghany, Caldwell, Watauga, and Wilkes Counties into a state of good repair to improve safety, environmental sustainability, quality of life, and economic competitiveness. These low water bridges are important access routes to rural North Carolina's High Country for regional industries, historically low-income populations, and critical services such as emergency response and school bus service.

The Project will directly improve safety in several ways. The new bridges and approaches will be designed for modern standards and vehicles, reducing crash costs and the potential for fatalities and injuries. Chief among these improvements will be the addition of barrier rails to the sides of the bridges, which are currently not present on 26 of the Project bridges. NCDOT research has found that the addition of barrier railings to this type of bridge reduces the likelihood of a crash by 32 percent. Second, the flooding frequency of the bridges drastically hinders the ability of emergency responders to provide services to the communities who rely on these bridges for access. Interviews with county EMS directors highlighted how these bridges serve as the essential lifeline for many in the community. When flooding events occur, emergency services are delayed or restricted entirely. Each of the replacement bridges will be built higher and designed to capture less debris, reducing the likelihood of being flooded and unavailable for use and reducing the time needed to reopen the bridges in instances when flooding cannot be avoided.

More frequent and severe weather and flood events caused from climate change disrupts the safety and reliability of transportation networks, particularly networks with outdated infrastructure that disproportionately impact surrounding low-income populations. Each bridge will be raised as close to the 25-year storm elevation as its physical setting will allow, improving environmental sustainability by increasing resilience of the structural design, material

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composition, and by incorporating environmental justice into all aspects of design and delivery. This Project will also support environmental sustainability by replacing timber bridges that leach contaminates into the region's waterways when overtopped with concrete decks that offer longer lifecycles. Furthermore, the Project will reduce Greenhouse Gas emissions by reducing the frequency with which the Project bridges are overtopped, thereby reducing the use of detour routes currently needed to circumvent impassable bridges.

The Project will improve the quality of life for communities around the Project bridges as the posted weight limit of the bridge causes a daily inconvenience to travelers and makes the bridges unsafe to cross for emergency vehicles, school buses, and legal truck weights. The weight limits on the bridge and frequent loss of service additionally may limit connectivity to essential services, healthcare, and job opportunities. The Project helps address this by providing improved access for underserved communities, addressing historical equity barriers.

The Project is located within and near Areas of Persistent Poverty and is anticipated to directly benefit low-income communities by increasing roadway continuity and access to critical infrastructure, services, and jobs. Incorporation of conduit for future broadband service on six bridges will also help address the state's urban-rural digital divides and reduce barriers to opportunity while increasing economic competitiveness for these areas. Businesses invest when they have confidence in the health of the economy; they invest where they have confidence in access to labor and markets. This Project will provide much needed improvements to the transportation network that will improve connectivity and therefore the economic competitiveness of the region, which currently suffers from high poverty levels and a lack of opportunity. The Project will directly support the supply chain of the North Carolina Christmas tree farm industry which grows over 26 percent of real Christmas trees in the United States, bringing revenue as well as tourism to western North Carolina.

This RAISE grant, when combined with significant state investment in road improvements throughout the region, would position North Carolina to immediately move forward to improve the state of good repair, enhance the economic competitiveness, resilience, safety, environmental sustainability, and quality of life in the region. The Project is a prudent investment that will proactively protect existing transportation assets, thereby preventing future losses.

North Carolina has over 850 Christmas tree growers that harvest approx. 4 million trees annually. The improvement of low water bridges in Avery, Ashe, Alleghany, Caldwell, Watauga, and Wilkes is imperative to the safety and livelihood of the Christmas tree farming communities.

For these reasons, I strongly urge you to support the ***Fixing LOw Water Bridges for Emergency, Transportation, Technology, Equity, and Resilience*** Project and the NCDOT's application for federal RAISE grant funding to accelerate its construction.

Sincerely,

Jennifer Greene
Executive Director