



Feb. 28, 2023

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

Dear Secretary Buttigieg:

Please accept this letter of support for the North Carolina Department of Transportation's (NCDOT's) **Greater Rural Access and Highways to Accelerate Mobility** ("GRAHAM" or "The Project") application for USDOT RAISE Program funds. The Project is the result of extensive collaboration between NCDOT, FHWA, ARC, Southwestern Rural Planning Organization, Appalachian Trail Conservancy, Graham and Cherokee County Commissioners and County Managers, and the Graham County Economic Development Director to improve a 12-mile portion of Corridor K of the Appalachian Development Highway System (ADHS) in Graham County, North Carolina, one of the last sections of the ADHS to be completed. The Wilderness Society has also been closely involved in the development of this project.

The Project will more safely and equitably serve all transportation modes in a remote portion of rural western North Carolina by adding climbing and passing lanes along NC 143 and NC 28 between Robbinsville and the Stecoah Valley; constructing new sidewalks and a 0.6 mile multiuse path to improve multimodal access to services, businesses and educational opportunities; and improving Appalachian Trail access and safety, including an innovative new land bridge to allow pedestrians and wildlife, to safely cross NC 143. The project also includes 2 Dynamic Message Signs, 6 Dynamic Trailblazers, and a new CCTV at the intersection of US 129 and NC 143 in Robbinsville, with signal coordination at five intersections. These ITS components alert travelers to emergencies and road closures along US 19/74, which occur frequently due to flooding and geotechnical failures. US 129, NC 143, and NC 28 are vital detours, but with only a single lane in each direction and inadequate communications to travelers, the increased traffic leads to congestion and travel delays.

The Project meets the goals of the RAISE program to support projects of significant local and regional impact and will improve the safety, mobility, and quality of life for residents of this remote and Historically Disadvantaged Community. The Project accomplishes the following goals:

Safety: The Project will reduce roadway fatalities and crashes and improve response times for emergency vehicles by introducing climbing and passing lanes and widening shoulders. In Robbinsville, where there is a disproportionate number of zero-vehicle households, new sidewalks will improve safety for non-motorized travelers.

Environmental Sustainability: The Project will replace retaining walls and improve embankments to make the corridor more resilient to natural disasters and extreme weather events. The Project also improves the region's resiliency by modernizing the corridor to serve as a reliable alternative to US 19/74 during flooding, landslides, and other emergency events. The Project will reduce travel time throughout the corridor, which will lead to reduced greenhouse gas emissions. New bicycle and pedestrian facilities will promote a modal shift to active transportation. The new land bridge will facilitate wildlife movement and help maintain wildlife connectivity between Nantahala National Forest and Great Smoky Mountains National Park. The Corridor K project won the National Association of Environmental Professionals Environmental Excellence Award in Environmental Management, Stewardship, Conservation, and Protection in 2021.

Quality of Life: The Project expands active transportation in Graham County, thereby improving public health outcomes and increasing access to healthcare, education, employment, and other essential services. Additionally, the Project's travel time savings and congestion reductions will decrease vehicle fuel and maintenance costs, lessening transportation cost burdens on local residents.

Mobility and Community Connectivity: The Project's multimodal components increase accessibility for non-motorized travelers in Historically Disadvantaged Communities. Moreover, realignments to the Appalachian Trail, including a new land bridge, will improve mobility for local residents and visitors to the region.

Economic Competitiveness and Opportunity: The Project will improve travel time reliability and freight mobility by modernizing the roadway and introducing signal coordination and other ITS components. The new land bridge and expanded parking at Stecoah Gap will draw more visitors to the scenic Appalachian Trail, increasing revenue for local businesses reliant on tourism and fostering the region's long-term economic growth.

State of Good Repair: The Project will restore and modernize the corridor while creating new multimodal infrastructure in a remote community. The Project will also mitigate system vulnerabilities by improving the reliability of this critical infrastructure asset in an underserved area.

Partnership and Collaboration: NCDOT partnered with a multitude of local, regional, and national organizations in the Project's planning and design. Representatives from environmental groups, Tribal Partners, and economic development organizations were all active participants. Robust engagement of residents and community-based organizations integrated equity considerations throughout the life-cycle of the Project.

Innovation: During planning and design for the Project, several innovative technologies were used such as Quantm 3D, an alignment optimization program; Ground Penetrating Radar to avoid areas of potential archaeological and ecological importance; and innovative methods to determine travel time reliability using a 365-day simulation model.

The Wilderness Society actively participated in the project planning and design. It was a very collaborative and innovative process, setting an excellent example for

how transportation projects should be planned. Every effort was made to address the pressing transportation needs in this area while also right sizing the project to preserve the outstanding natural and scenic resources in the corridor. We are particularly excited about the land bridge at Stecoah Gap. This land bridge will allow hikers on the Appalachian Trail to cross the highway safely. It will also provide a critical link for wildlife to cross the highway, maintaining a critical corridor for wildlife to safely move between Great Smoky Mountains National Park and critical wildlife habitat in Nantahala National Forest.

For these reasons The Wilderness Society strongly encourages you to support the GRAHAM project and NCDOT's application for federal RAISE grant funding to make the final improvements to Corridor K.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in cursive script that reads "Hugh Irwin". The signature is written in dark ink on a light-colored background.

Hugh Irwin
Senior Conservation Specialist
The Wilderness Society