



September 22, 2023

The Honorable Pete Buttigieg
Secretary of Transportation
US Department of Transportation
1200 New Jersey Avenue, S.E.
Washington, DC 20590

Dear Secretary Buttigieg,

Please accept this letter of support for the **Growing Rural Equity and Access to Transportation in North Carolina (GREAT-NC)** application to the USDOT's 2023 Neighborhood Access and Equity (NAE) Program's Regional Partnerships Challenge Grant. GREAT-NC is partnership between North Carolina Department of Transportation (NCDOT) and the Great Trails State Coalition (GTSC), a diverse coalition of 87 agencies, municipalities and organizations advocating for increased state investment in all forms of non-motorized trails in North Carolina. GREAT-NC will address the persistent regional mobility challenge that North Carolina's rural, disadvantaged communities face in accessing federal funding to retrofit roads with safe biking, walking, and crossing infrastructure.

Historically, North Carolina's pattern of rural road development has systemically favored automobile travel at the expense of access for pedestrians and cyclists. This practice divided rural communities with high-speed, high-traffic roadways which typically excluded facilities for biking and walking. Compounding this challenge, in 2013 North Carolina lawmakers prohibited state funding for independent bicycle and pedestrian projects. As a result, rural and disadvantaged communities have fallen further behind communities with more resources when it comes to the design and construction of biking and walking facilities.

GREAT-NC will address these disparities by creating a construction-ready pipeline of approximately 148 miles of pedestrian and bicycle facilities found in the Great Trail State Plan and located in economically disadvantaged, rural communities, while building local capacity for project delivery to support the creation of safe and equitable bicycle and pedestrian access to daily destinations in rural North Carolina GREAT-NC will create context-sensitive transportation solutions that are more affordable, safe, and accessible for all.

Capitalizing on the momentum generated by the Great Trails State Plan and the designation of 2023 as North Carolina's "Year of the Trail" by the North Carolina General Assembly, NCDOT and GTSC will establish a robust capacity building program that includes a statewide conference, the creation of technical assistance positions to directly support communities implementing GREAT-NC projects, and the convening of the Cities, Towns and Counties for Trails Working Group to serve as a peer group for participating communities.

In Warren County, North Carolina, the federal highways of US Hwy 1, US Hwy 158, and US Hwy 401 essentially stretch the entire span of Warren County in multiple directions. The county wants to retrofit US Hwy 158 and US Hwy 401 with a multi-modal pathway in order to mitigate the lack of safe pedestrian and cycling access between the county's three municipalities (Norlina, Warrenton, and Macon). The goal is to build community connectivity between the three municipalities, which geographically make a triangular "loop".

As a rural county, Warren County does not currently have these resources and most residents do not have access to private gyms for health and wellness. The majority of residents live outside of town limits and do not have access to any sidewalks on any federal or state highway. If they want to walk or bike on designated pathways or lanes, they have to transport themselves into a town to a gym, or they have to walk alongside a federal or state highway with speeds of 55 mph+.

A multi-modal pathway will encourage an active lifestyle, create safe transit and recreation opportunities, and provide residents a safe alternative to automotive transportation in getting from town to town, thereby helping to reduce emissions. Connecting the county's only three municipalities with a multi-modal pathway has been advocated for by residents and businesses who are looking for safe and healthy lifestyle options, as well as an opportunity for economic growth for our small business communities.

With the exception of city limits and one school zone outside of city limits, the federal transportation facilities of US Hwy 401 and 158 operate a 55-mph speed limit on two-lane roads; therefore, the majority of the impacted area has a barrier to transportation for pedestrians and cyclists of high speeds and unsafe conditions for non-automotive modes of travel. The triangular area enclosed by US Hwy 158 (business and bypass) and US Hwy 401 is approximately twenty-seven miles around the entire "loop". While large parts of the directly impacted area are agricultural residential (as is a majority of the county), the directly impacted area does contain much of the county's neighborhood business and industrial zoned parcels. Because the impacted area connects the only three municipalities in the county, it is historically been our largest commercial area. Recent decades have seen a commercial growth in the north east region of the county around Lake Gaston; however, for the majority of full-time residents in the county, the directly impacted area is the priority commercial hub for economic development activity.

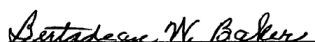
The entire project area is an economically distressed area as designated by the USDOT Federal Highway Administration HEPGIS tool.

Warren County's vision for a greenway/multi-modal path that will connect its three municipalities is as follows: Warren County's greenways & trails safely link residents, families, and visitors to each other while fostering a deeper connection to the outdoors and natural landscape of the community. Through activities on the trail, new relationships are forged, old connections are restored, and economic opportunities are vibrant and accessible. The community is more health-conscious; they are environmental stewards and value public spaces, transportation, and art.

The mission of the Warren County Greenways & Trails is to link key destinations, services, and economic opportunities by designing safe greenways and trails that are accessible to residents and visitors with diverse mobility needs and from varied economic backgrounds.

Thank you for your consideration of the GREAT NC's application for funding through the NAE Regional Partnerships Challenge program.

Sincerely,



Bertadean Baker, Chair

Warren County Board of Commissioners