

March 11, 2021

The Honorable Pete Buttigieg
Secretary of Transportation
U.S. Department of Transportation
1200 New Jersey Avenue S.E.
Washington, D.C. 20590

Re: Support for the Columbus Crossroads INFRA Application

Dear Secretary Buttigieg:

On behalf of AECOM, we are writing this letter to express our strong support and to reinforce the strong regional support for the joint City of Columbus and Ohio Department of Transportation (ODOT) INFRA grant application for Phase 4 of the Columbus Crossroads project.

Downtown Columbus has made great progress in the last few decades, bringing population and jobs back to the area. Nationwide Arena (home of the NHL Columbus Blue Jackets) and the entire Arena District built 20 years ago, continue to thrive and draw new businesses. A new home for the MLS Columbus Crew is being built in this same area. Other areas of Downtown Columbus have made similar strides, such as Brewery District, Short North, German Village, and Discovery District; and the downtown convention center routinely draws large audiences. The current interstate highway system through the downtown area needs upgraded to keep up with this boom, and local leaders have been addressing this need. However, funding limitations are extending the development schedule, causing daily commute delays for locals, daily delays for truck movements, and significant safety concerns for all. AECOM employs 150 people in Downtown Columbus. We care about their safety and the safety of everyone living in and traveling through our City. Any acceleration of completion of the Downtown Crossroads interstate system will bring safer travel and increased quality of life for all.

Columbus Crossroads is a community-led \$1.3 billion, multi-phase project to transform the crossroads of Interstates 70 and 71. The project improves one of the key corridors of the National Primary Highway Freight System; while at the same time leveraging this infrastructure investment to help restore and reconnect communities that were adversely impacted, first by redlining and second by constructing I-70 and I-71. Current and future phases of work, including Phase 4, from this multi-phase project are now integrated within ODOT's Downtown Ramp Up construction project.

Phase 4 is a \$230 million sub-phase focused on the freeway mainline in the physical overlap of I-70 and I-71; as well as the surface streets surrounding it, and the bridges spanning it. The freeway mainline in the overlap serves commuter traffic from across the state and freight traffic from across the nation. The overlap carries 130,000 vehicles per day – including 17,100 commercial vehicles – and exceeds its design capacity by 50,000 vehicles. As a result, this area contains three of Ohio's top ten freeway crash locations. The overlap's trench also creates a physical barrier between Downtown Columbus and the neighborhoods south of the overlap. While this major investment will replace obsolete highway infrastructure, Columbus Crossroads will also restore connections, build ladders of opportunity, transform communities, and revitalize Downtown Columbus and surrounding neighborhoods.

ODOT, the City of Columbus, the Mid-Ohio Regional Planning Commission (MORPC), and a diverse group of community stakeholders and business entities have collaborated over the last decade to develop and implement this comprehensive vision. Before I-71 was built in the 1960s, the King-Lincoln District bustled with 63,000 people and was the center of culture, commerce, civic life, and church in the African American community. By 2000, the neighborhood had dwindled down to just 16,000 residents, only 21 percent of the people in this area owned their homes, one in 5 were out of work, and nearly half lived in poverty. In 2014, Phase 1 of the Columbus Crossroads project restored the connection to the King-Lincoln District with the Long Street Bridge and Cultural Wall – one of the most revered pieces of infrastructure in all of the City. In 2016, USDOT believed that the Columbus Crossroads Project was of such national significance that the Long Street Bridge and Cultural Wall was featured on the cover of the FY2017 USDOT Budget. Then Secretary Anthony Foxx wrote, “This effort to reconnect and revitalize a community divided by past transportation policies is a compelling example of how transportation can create or eliminate opportunity gaps in our Nation.”

Phase 4’s bridge and surface street components continue this tradition, as the sub-phase is focused on restoring connections across the interstate to Southside neighborhoods as well as improving the built environment surrounding the project area. This phase will include planting new street trees throughout the project area; supporting new EV charging stations along the NHS; constructing a cap on both sides of the High Street bridge and the Third Street bridge; and adding improved bicycle and pedestrian facilities to the Fourth Street bridge. The City and ODOT will also do extensive engagement and provide locations within the project limits for public art that are meaningful to the community. Furthermore, Phase 4 complements the \$28 million the City is investing in Livingston Avenue to build complete streets, improve safety, and provide better access to both Southside neighborhoods and Nationwide Children’s Hospital, which is one of the top children’s health facilities in the nation.

We respectfully request that the U.S. Department of Transportation consider the importance of these improvements to the restoration of our communities, the prosperity of our region and state, and the resiliency of the national interstate highway system; and we urge your consideration of the application.

Yours sincerely,

AECOM



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