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April 30, 2024

The Honorable Pete Buttigieg
Secretary
United States Department of Transportation
1200 New Jersey Avenue SE
Washington, DC 20590

Dear Secretary Buttigieg:

On behalf the Northwestern Indiana Regional Planning Commission (NIRPC), I am writing in support of the Illinois Department of Transportation's (IDOT) application for Multimodal Project Discretionary Grant Opportunity (MPDG) funding on behalf of the Chicago Region Environmental and Transportation Efficiency (CREATE) Program. These grants will fund the first segment of the Belt Junction and 80th Street Junction Replacements project, known as EW2a. The project includes reconfiguring the Belt Railway Company (BRC) main tracks between the Dan Ryan Expressway and Belt Junction where four freight railroad tracks intersect with each other and Metra's SouthWest Service operations.

NIRPC is the Metropolitan Planning Organization (MPO) for northwest Indiana, where freight is an extensive and critical part of our region and our future. Our position in the metropolitan Chicago area causes us to experience firsthand the confluence of our nation's freight transportation system. A quarter of all U.S. freight rail traffic originates, terminates, or passes through the Chicago area, with that volume forecasted to increase nearly 150 percent by the year 2040. Our recently adopted Metropolitan Transportation Plan, *NWI 2050+*, has a robust chapter devoted to freight movement – such is the importance of these issues to our region that traverse state boundaries.

This subject of IDOT's application is a key part of the 75th Street Corridor Improvement Project (CIP) – a grouping of four major improvements that make up the most complex portion of the overall CREATE Program – and are being advanced as a single project due to their logistical and environmental linkages. The first two components of the CIP (projects P3 and GS19) began construction in October 2022 with the support of a 2018 INFRA grant and are on schedule for completion in 2026. The remaining two project components of the 75th Street CIP, projects EW2 and P2, are critical to ensure the full benefits of the overall project. Project EW2 is being designed as multiple project segments, due to the scope and scale of the project, with EW2a being the first phase of the effort.

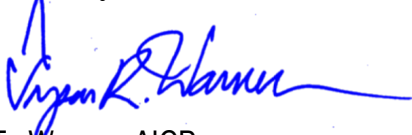
Project segment EW2a will reconfigure Belt Railway Company (BRC), Norfolk Southern (NS), and Metra tracks and rebuild 14 century-old railroad structures, including 86 bridges, over local streets in three South Side Chicago neighborhoods. A third dedicated BRC main track will be constructed, eliminating route conflicts for freight and Metra trains. This project will begin to alleviate the most congested rail chokepoint in North America, Chicago's Belt Junction, where 30 Metra and 90 freight trains cross each other's paths each day. The project will also improve neighborhood connectivity by replacing railroad structures over city streets and will set the stage for re-routing Metra's SouthWest Service trains out of Union Station and into LaSalle Street station via upcoming CREATE project P2, which will greatly increase Union Station capacity for future Amtrak intercity and Metra commuter rail service.

Project segment EW2a aligns with the CREATE Program's overall goals to improve rail operations in the Chicago metropolitan area and improve quality of life in neighborhoods near rail. The benefits derived from this project are anticipated to improve the overall freight system, affecting our region on the southern shores of Lake Michigan where industry and the movement of goods and materials makes up a significant part of our region's history and economy.

Even beyond these local and regional benefits, these improvements will have a significant positive impact on the national supply chain. The efficiencies resulting from this project support the movement of people and consumer goods throughout the nation. The 75th St CIP project includes investments in K-12 education and workforce opportunities as well as community mobility improvements (CMI). These CMIs enhance the safety, accessibility, quality of life, and visual appeal of the community while enhancing local transportation systems for people walking, bicycling, taking transit, and driving. Not only does EW2a support economic growth, but neighboring communities also benefit from cleaner air, reduced railroad delays, improved economic development potential, and more fluid freight and passenger rail systems – all of which are goals of our publicly-adopted Metropolitan Transportation Plan, *NWI 2050+*.

I therefore support this application on behalf of the Northwestern Indiana Regional Planning Commission. We look forward to the project's successful implementation to the benefit of the greater Chicagoland region and that of the national economy.

Sincerely,



Ty Warner AICP
Executive Director
Northwestern Indiana Regional Planning Commission