July 24, 2024

To: Secretary Pete Buttigieg, Department of Transportation

CC: Administrator Shailen Bhatt, Federal Highway Administration
    Acting Under Secretary Christopher Coes, Department of Transportation

Subject: Reconnecting Communities as a principle for ALL USDOT discretionary grant programs

Dear Secretary Buttigieg,

We, the undersigned 155 organizations, often hear that Reconnecting Communities is a principle at the US Department of Transportation, not just a grant program. Yet many state departments of transportation continue to seek federal discretionary grant funding for projects that run counter purpose to this principle. Some of them are successful. Some of them promote damaging highway expansions under the guise of Reconnecting Communities, subverting the principle.

A case in point is an application like the Oregon Department of Transportation’s (ODOT’s) FY 25-26 I-5 Rose Quarter Improvement Project to USDOT’s INFRA program. The I-5 Rose Quarter Improvement Project began in 2017 as a highway widening project and remains a highway widening project - with plans to increase I-5’s existing width by two to three times! Community advocates in Portland have pushed instead for a highway cap, to partially mitigate harm done to the Black community in North Portland’s Albina neighborhood from the original construction of I-5. ODOT has adopted the cap into its plans, because it anticipates being able to leverage programs like USDOT’s Reconnecting Communities and Neighborhoods to unlock money for the project’s expansion component. As expected, ODOT’s INFRA application bundles together highway expansion and highway cap, despite the RCN program’s insistence that its programming cannot be used for building new highway capacity.

1 ODOT’s scope for the project can be found here. https://www.i5rosequarter.org/media/m04lalit/rq-infra-report-budget_20240506.pdf
2 Through a public records request, advocates from No More Freeways have found that ODOT intends to expand the footprint of I-5 through the Rose Quarter from 82 feet wide to 160 feet wide (and as much as 250 feet wide in some sections). This is wide enough to be striped as a 10-lane highway. ODOT has not made this information publicly available. No More Freeway’s letter can be read here: https://nomorefreewayspdx.com/wp-content/uploads/2024/07/070224-NMF-Comments-opposing-Oregon-DOT-INFRA-grant-application-as-submitted.pdf
3 An August 2022 letter from ODOT to the Oregon legislature requesting funding the project’s new lanes makes this clear: “Any award of RCP funding would represent an initial investment in the highway cover and would unlock the potential for additional Federal funding.” https://www.oregon.gov/odot/IF/EboardRequests/ODOT_IIIA%20Reconnecting%20Communities%20Rose%20Quarter%20Request%20to%20Apply%20Grant_Letter.pdf
4 USDOT wrote in a letter announcing ODOT’s receipt of the RCN grant: “Projects receiving RCN grant funding cannot be used for additional through travel lanes for single-occupant passenger vehicles or highway expansion.” That letter can be read here: https://www.i5rosequarter.org/media/p3jd3zls/rcn-2023-capital-award-letter-rose-quarter.pdf

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Adding lanes to a highway and expanding its footprint disconnects communities and repeats the harms of 20th century highway building that the RCN program seeks to repair. Any project that pursues this goal cannot simultaneously claim that it reconnects communities.

We ask that USDOT fund only the portions of discretionary grant applications that align with the principle of Reconnecting Communities, in cases where applicants apply to USDOT programs seeking to leverage the Reconnecting Communities elements to unlock funding for associated highway widening.

Furthermore, we applaud that this year’s Notice of Funding Opportunity for the Reconnecting Communities and Neighborhoods program asks applicants if a highway expansion is associated with the project and reduces the application’s score if the answer is yes. This criterion should be applied to all USDOT discretionary grant programs, to reinforce Reconnecting Communities as a USDOT principle.

The harms of additional lanes of freeway in vulnerable communities are myriad and significant - increased air pollution, greater noise pollution, contributions to the urban heat island effect, loss of affordable housing, more impermeable surfaces increasing flood risk, and of course greater carbon emissions from induced driving - at a time in which communities across America are struggling to find answers to these overlapping challenges while adapting to a quickly changing climate. Reconnecting Communities as a principle and a guiding light for all USDOT discretionary programs has the power to tackle these challenges head on.

Signed,

America Walks, initiating organization
National
#blvdtampa
Tampa, FL
1000 Friends of Oregon
Oregon (statewide)
1000 Friends of Wisconsin
Wisconsin (statewide)
350 Milwaukee
Milwaukee, WI
Active San Gabriel Valley
El Monte, CA
Air Alliance Houston
Houston, TX
Albany Riverfront Collaborative
Albany, NY

Allendale Strong
Shreveport, LA
Alliance for a Just Society
National
Bergen County Complete Streets
Fort Lee, NJ
Bike Durham
Durham, NC
Bike Hoboken
Hoboken, NJ
Bike JC
Jersey City, NJ
Bike Long Beach
Long Beach, CA
Bike Loud PDX
Portland, OR
Bike North Bergen  
North Bergen, NJ
BikeWalkKC  
Kansas City, MO
BQE Environmental Justice Coalition  
New York, NY
Brain Injury Association of Missouri  
Columbia, MO
Bridge Forward Cincinnati  
Cincinnati, OH
California Walks  
California (statewide)
Capital Streets  
Albany, NY
Central Maryland Transportation Alliance  
Baltimore, MD
Chattanooga-Hamilton County/North Georgia Metropolitan Planning Organization  
Chattanooga, TN
Citizens’ Alliance for a Sustainable Englewood  
Englewood, CO
City Observatory  
Portland, OR
Claiborne Avenue Alliance Design Studio  
New Orleans, LA
Climate and Community Project National Climate Resolve  
Los Angeles, CA
ClimatePlan  
California (statewide)
Coalition Against the Mid-States Corridor  
Jasper, IN
Coalition for A New Dallas  
Dallas, TX
Colorado Community Rights Network  
Colorado (statewide)
Colorado Jewish Climate Action  
Colorado (statewide)
Colorscape Architecture + Urban Design  
San Marcos, TX
Community First Coalition  
El Paso, TX
Community for Sustainable Energy  
Fort Collins, CO
Congress for the New Urbanism  
National Connecting Urban Erie  
Erie, PA
Covington Associates Consulting  
Buffalo, NY
Creative Development Partners  
Oakland, CA
Day One  
Pasadena, CA
Denver Streets Partnership  
Denver, CO
Detroit Greenways Coalition  
Detroit, MI
Devou Good Foundation  
Cincinnati, OH
Duluth Waterfront Collective  
Duluth, MN
Earth Day Mobile Bay, Inc.  
Farhope, AL
East Coast Greenway Alliance National (East Coast)
East Side Collaborative Partnership  
Buffalo, NY
El Paso Streets Coalition  
El Paso, TX
ForeverGreen Trails  
Tacoma, WA
Friends of Great Highway Park  
San Francisco, CA
Friends of Metcalf Park  
Orange, NJ
Friends of Slow Streets
Grand Rapids, MI
Frontier Metropolitan Planning Organization
Fort Smith, AR
Gainesville-Area Action for Environmental Justice
Gainesville, FL
Glendale Environmental Coalition
Glendale, CA
Greater Park Hill Community, Inc.
Denver, CO
GreenLatinos
National
Green New Deal Network
National
GrowSmart Maine
Maine (statewide)
HEAL Utah
Salt Lake City, UT
Health by Design
Indiana (statewide)
Hinge Neighbors Inc.
Rochester, NY
Hudson County Complete Streets
Hudson County, NJ
I-475 Neighborhoods Coalition
Toledo, OH
Idaho Walk Bike Alliance
Idaho (statewide)
Institute for Public Architecture
New York, NY
Law Office of Dennis M Grzezinski
Milwaukee, WI
Lid I-5
Seattle, WA
LINK Houston
Houston, TX
Living Streets Alliance
Tucson, AZ
Local Motion
Burlington, VT
Louisiana 4-Corners Coalition for Transportation Planning Reform
Louisiana (statewide)
Madison Area Bus Advocates
Dane County, WI
Mainers for Smarter Transportation
Portland, ME
Marin County Bicycle Coalition
Marin County, CA
Mayfair Park Neighborhood Association
Denver, CO
Mental Health & Inclusion Ministries
Colorado (statewide)
Metropolitan Planning Council
Chicago, IL
Milwaukee Riverkeeper
Milwaukee, WI
Mobilify Southwestern Pennsylvania
Pittsburgh, PA
Montbello Neighborhood Improvement Association
Denver, CO
Mothers Out Front Colorado
Colorado (statewide)
Move Redmond
Redmond, WA
Natural Resources Defense Council
National
New Jersey Bike & Walk Coalition
New Jersey (statewide)
Nikhil Badlani Foundation
West Orange, NJ
No More Freeways
Portland, OR
North Central Kansas Coordinated Transit District
Salina, KS
North Range Concerned Citizens
Commerce City, CO
North Salt Lake City Council
North Salt Lake, UT
Oklahomans For Responsible Transportation
Oklahoma City, OK
Olathe Public Schools
Olathe, KS
OPAL Environmental Justice Oregon
Portland, OR
Oregon Walks
Oregon (statewide)
Our Little Rock
Little Rock, AR
Our Streets
Minneapolis, MN
Palm Beach County Environmental Coalition
Lake Worth, FL
Parking Reform Network
National
Pedestrian Dignity Project
National
Pinnacle Prevention
Chandler, AZ
PLACE Initiative
Portland, OR
Precinct 2, El Paso County, Texas
El Paso, TX
Puente Latino Association Inc
Long Beach, CA
Reconnect Austin
Austin, TX
Reconnect Rochester
Rochester, NY
Reconnect South Park Coalition
Seattle, WA
Reimagine I-175 St Pete
St. Petersburg, FL
Restore Our Community Coalition
Buffalo, NY
Rethink35
Austin, TX
Ride the Cov
Covington, KY
Riders Alliance
New York, NY
Roosevelt Boulevard Subway
Philadelphia, PA
RTD Rider’s Alliance
Denver, CO
Sacramento Area Bicycle Advocates
Sacramento, CA
Safe Streets Austin
Austin, TX
SafeStreetsJC
Jersey City, NJ
Scajaquada Corridor Coalition
Buffalo, NY
Sierra Club
National
Spirit of the Sun
Denver, CO
Stop TxDOT I-45
Houston, TX
Streets For All
Los Angeles, CA
Strong Towns Grand Rapids
Grand Rapids, MI
Sunnyside United Neighbors, Inc
Denver, CO
Sunrise Movement
National
Sustain Charlotte
Charlotte, NC
Texas Streets Coalition
Texas (statewide)
The Brooklyn Heights Association
Brooklyn, NY
The New Haven Safe Street Coalition
New Haven, CT
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