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August 25, 2023

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. This grant will fund a segment of the Belt Junction and 80th Street Junction Replacements (defined as "EW2"), which includes reconfiguring the Belt Railway Company (BRC) main tracks between the Dan Ryan Expressway and Belt Junction, where four freight railroads conflict 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 part of the 75th Street Corridor Improvement Project (CIP), a grouping of four smaller projects that make up the most complex portion of the overall CREATE Program, and have been advanced as a single project, due to their logistical and environmental linkages. The four projects take place along two passenger routes and six freight rail lines. The first two components of the CIP (projects P3 and GS19) began construction in October 2022 with the support of a 2018 INFRA grant. The remaining two components, projects EW2 and P2, are critical to ensure the complete benefits of the project.

This segment of EW2 project will reconfigure Belt Railway Company (BRC), Norfolk Southern (NS), and Metra tracks. A third BRC main track will be constructed, thus eliminating multiple conflicting paths for freight, Metra, and Amtrak trains. This project will start to

alleviate the congestion at the most congested rail chokepoint in North America in the Chicago Terminal, the Belt Junction, where 30 Metra and 90 freight trains cross each other's paths per day. This project will also improve performance on the Amtrak Cardinal service, by eliminating freight conflicts in the vicinity of 80th Street.

Project EW2 aligns with CREATE Program's overall goals to improve rail operations in the Chicago metropolitan area, while reducing the environmental impacts of rail operations on the public. As mentioned previously, 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 regional benefits, these improvements will have a major impact on the national supply chain. The efficiencies resulting from this project support the movement of people and consumer goods along important railway systems and communities throughout the nation. Environmental justice is a critical part of the 75th St. CIP with both education and workforce opportunities as well as community mobility improvements that will enhance the safety, accessibility, quality of life, visual appeal of the community and enhance the transit-riding experience. Not only do these projects 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