

# Congress of the United States

Washington, DC 20515

September 15, 2023

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

Dear Secretary Buttigieg:

We are writing to express our deep concern regarding the decision to put the Northern Branch Corridor Project on hold pending the completion of a new environmental impact statement (EIS). Since 2007, New Jersey Transit (NJ TRANSIT) has pursued approval for this critical mass transit expansion and encountered continuous challenges and roadblocks, including a five-year delay from the federal government to review its latest version of the EIS. For years now, NJ TRANSIT has been communicating closely with the U.S. Department of Transportation (USDOT). NJ TRANSIT has consistently provided USDOT with updated environmental information, including areas identified for reevaluation — from floodplains and stormwater management to hazardous waste and air quality. After consultation with NJ TRANSIT, USDOT's decision to reject NJ TRANSIT's full EIS and direct the agency to complete a new EIS is a surprising development, which will cause massive delays.

USDOT claims it is committed to promoting mass transit and equitable transportation policies. In Congress, we have fought for and supported federal infrastructure investments, including billions of dollars for New Jersey in the Bipartisan Infrastructure Bill that can be utilized for projects like the Hudson-Bergen Light Rail (HBLR). USDOT's delay of the HBLR Northern Branch Corridor Project seems to contradict that goal, and makes it more difficult for Jersey families to commute using mass transit.

In an area with limited mass transit options, this project is a critical lifeline that would allow North Jersey residents to commute more efficiently and reduce their environmental impact. As champions of the environment and public health, this delay is particularly alarming when viewed in contrast with USDOT recent approval of New York's Congestion Tax without requiring an EIS, despite a preliminary Metropolitan Transportation Authority (MTA) report finding that it

will increase carcinogen-filled air pollution in New Jersey and the boroughs surrounding Manhattan.<sup>[1][2]</sup>

The Northern Branch Corridor Project is a proposed light rail project that will extend the current HBLR along an existing freight rail line, from the current terminus at Tonnelle Avenue in Hudson County north to a new terminus at Englewood Hospital in Bergen County. It will provide a new passenger service to connect towns that had been previously inaccessible via public transit. This extension will improve commuting, mobility, and mitigate traffic congestion in the New York metropolitan area and for hospital workers at Englewood Hospital and Medical Center — providing residents and commuters with affordable, efficient, and convenient transportation options, while also helping to reduce air pollution and greenhouse gas emissions. NJ TRANSIT is working thoroughly to compile the data and information necessary to restart the EIS process. We ask that USDOT immediately commit to expediting this process, putting the project back on track.

USDOT's recent decision starkly contrasts with its approval of New York City's Congestion Tax, which was based on a preliminary environmental assessment (EA) revealing environmental harm to Northern New Jersey communities and other New York City boroughs. Studies on the environmental impact of the Congestion Tax detailed that it will negatively impact air quality and increase pollution levels, affecting our children's health.<sup>3</sup> The swift approval of New York's Congestion Tax, despite findings that it will increase air pollution in New Jersey communities, raises head-scratching questions about the consistency of USDOT's decision-making processes.

Our constituents request an expeditious review and full transparency into what actions USDOT is taking to invest in mass transit options in Northern New Jersey. Consistency in USDOT decision-making is essential to fostering trust in those of us committed to environmental justice for all Americans.

Thank you for your attention to this important matter, and we look forward to your response.

Sincerely,

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1 "Finding of No Significant Impact (FONSI): Central Business District (CBD) Tolling Program." *U.S. Department of Transportation Federal Highway Administration*. Page 23. Jun. 2023. Retrieved from: <https://new.mta.info/document/114186>.

2 "Central Business District (CBD) Tolling Program: Final Environmental Assessment." *U.S. Department of Transportation Federal Highway Administration*. Pages 10-25-10-34, 10-37, 10-38. Apr. 2023. Retrieved from: <https://new.mta.info/document/111101>.

3 Colon, D. "MTA Offers Funding for Bronx Clean-Up to Get Congestion Pricing Over the Line." *StreetsBlog NYC*. 27 Mar. 2023. Retrieved from: <https://nyc.streetsblog.org/2023/03/27/exclusive-secret-mta-memo-offers-funding-for-bronx-clean-up-to-get-congestion-pricing-over-the-line>.



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Josh Gottheimer  
Member of Congress



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Andy Kim  
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Bonnie Watson Coleman  
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