Dear Governor Youngkin,

I am writing to further engage with you and your administration regarding the findings of the recent audit published in August 2022 by the Office of the State Inspector General (IG) regarding the January 2022 preparation for and response to a historic weather event that ultimately shut down portions of the Interstate 95 corridor for more than 24 hours. The audit presents a critical review of our Commonwealth’s preparation and response. It is vital that we never again see a repeat of the circumstances that clogged a critical transportation artery, left Virginians – young and old – stranded without food and medication in their vehicles for more than 24 hours, and demonstrated a vulnerability to our Commonwealth’s and nation’s security. Preventing a repeat of these horrible circumstances requires intense oversight by your administration.

Since my last correspondence, I was pleased to see the release of an independent after-action report in April 2022, which provided important information detailing the shortcomings in the response in advance of the snowstorm, challenges responding to the resulting I95 stoppages, and recommendations for new steps to prevent such an occurrence from ever happening again. As you are aware, I advocated for the timely completion of this after-action report to ensure all relevant local and state stakeholders may implement process improvements well in advance of the coming winter. However, I am deeply concerned by the newly-released IG audit, which takes a very critical view of the Commonwealth’s level of preparation in advance of that early January storm, our current level of preparedness were we to face similar circumstances in the coming winter months, and our state agencies’ history of not implementing fulsome process improvements after serious events such as the December 2018 I81 shutdown.

While neither of these interstate shutdowns occurred during your administration, it now falls to your administration to ensure that the Virginia Department of Transportation (VDOT), Virginia Department of Emergency Management (VDEM), and other associated agencies implement the recommendations of previous after-action reports once and for all. As the IG audit details, had prior after-action report recommendations been implemented, Virginia could have avoided or mitigated much of the impact of that 2022 storm and shutdown, and yet, state agencies are still not yet making necessary changes.

Following this report, I request answers to the following questions:

1. What steps is your administration taking to ensure that the Virginia Department of Transportation (VDOT) implements all recommendations from the after-action report published this spring regarding the events of January 3, as well as the recommendations from the report following the events of December 9-10, 2018?
2. What factors contributed to the failure to implement the recommendations of the 2018 after-action report?
3. What accountability processes or procedures will be put in place at VDOT to ensure that all future lessons are implemented in a timely fashion?
4. The audit also identified a failure of the Virginia Department of Emergency Management to develop a hazard-specific emergency plan for snowfall. Is VDEM taking steps to conduct hazard-specific snow event response planning for the Commonwealth before this winter?

5. What steps have been taken to address the communication failures identified in the Inspector General’s report?

On behalf of the people of Virginia’s Seventh District, I thank you for your attention to this serious matter.

Sincerely,

Abigail D. Spanberger

Member of Congress