



September 25, 2023

The Honorable Pete Buttigieg
Secretary of Transportation
U.S. Department of Transportation
1200 New Jersey Avenue S.E.
Washington, D.C. 20590

Re: West Broad Street Bus Rapid Transit Corridor Neighborhood Access and Equity (NAE) Capital Construction and Regional Partnerships Challenge Grants Application

Dear Secretary Buttigieg,

On behalf of Steelton Rising, I am writing in support of the Central Ohio Transit Authority's (COTA) request for funding from Capital Construction and Regional Partnership Challenge Grants within the USDOT NAE Grant Program for the West Broad Street Bus Rapid Transit (BRT) corridor.

Steelton Rising is a 501c3 non-profit organization dedicated to catalyzing the founding and growth of resident- owned businesses in South Columbus, with a focus on promoting equitable and sustainable neighborhoods, and helping to reduce South Columbus' neighborhood, racial, and wealth divides. The name Steelton is a connection to the history of South Columbus, where about 130 years ago a diverse mix of workers in the steel and glass industries built homes, businesses, churches, schools, and families. We believe that economic growth and self- sufficiency can be most rapidly achieved and sustained through the founding and growth of small, resident-owned and staffed businesses, and promoting networks of these businesses and their owners.

To create and sustain successful businesses in our neighborhoods, we need to connect workplaces with both their workers and their customers. We need safe and pedestrian-friendly connections within downtown Columbus and its surrounding neighborhoods, including the neighborhoods of South Columbus. We need to make our current car-centric system more safe and practical for local residents and workers, especially those who cannot afford an automobile. The completion of the Columbus LinkUS BRT corridors will help us achieve this important goal.

The West Broad Street BRT corridor is the first rapid transit corridor that will be constructed as part of the regional LinkUS partnership of COTA, City of Columbus, Franklin County, and the Mid-Ohio Regional Planning Commission. LinkUS is Central Ohio's comprehensive mobility initiative to help address growth, affordability and opportunity gaps in our community. Central Ohio is one of the fastest growing regions in the country and is on track to increase by 726,000 more residents over the next 25 years. The average Central Ohio household spends more than \$12,000 on transportation and the median home

sale price is up 68% since 2020. More than 40,000 Franklin County households lack access to a personal vehicle and 1/3 of Franklin County residents live in areas of low opportunity. To address these challenges, LinkUS will build faster and more reliable public transportation, create safer and expanded bike and pedestrian paths, and enable truly walkable communities with more affordable access to work, meaningful workforce training opportunities, home, and entertainment.

By 2050, LinkUS plans to construct: 5 rapid transit corridors and increase transit service hours by 45%; 500 new miles of sidewalks, bikeways, and trails; and \$250 million in complete streets roadway improvements. Implementing LinkUS will advance numerous federal, state and local existing initiatives that are working to improve housing, poverty, safety, and climate action in our community. Federal initiatives include the Columbus Workforce Hub and the National Information Technology Innovation Center; state initiatives include creating a state climate action plan with funding from the U.S. EPA Climate Pollution Reduction Grant Program; and local initiatives include Equitable Transit Oriented Development, Vision Zero, and the Columbus Climate Action Plan. LinkUS will move our region forward, together, starting with the West Broad BRT corridor. A later LinkUS phase will build the South BRT corridor, and that will connect our South Side neighborhoods with the broader, comprehensive LinkUS system.

The West Broad Street BRT Corridor includes 17 stations and will run approximately 9.3 miles along West Broad Street connecting Prairie Township, Franklin Township, Hilltop, and Franklinton to Downtown Columbus. Where possible, it will have dedicated lanes for transit with premium stations in the center lane. It will also run on 15 minutes or less intervals and have many of the same amenities as light rail such as off board fare collection and level and multidoor boarding.

This investment will greatly improve the opportunity gaps along the corridor, which stem from significant socio-economic disparities: approximately 76% of residents live within an area of persistent poverty; 36% of residents are Black, Indigenous, or persons of color; 30% of residents live below the federal poverty level; and 16% of households lack access to a personal vehicle. The West Broad Street BRT will expand access, increase safety and enhance mobility for corridor residents as well as the thousands of people working within the corridor.

The West Broad BRT corridor is projected to support the addition of 40,000 more residents along the corridor by 2040; and connect nearly 100,000 jobs along the corridor by 2040. The corridor will also provide the regional workforce to Columbus State Community College, a federally designated anchor institution for the Columbus Workforce Hub and the lead institution for the National Information Technology Innovation Center.

LinkUS will use the spaces surrounding the BRT stations to invest in trails, bikeways, accessible pedestrian paths and sidewalks, making it safer and more convenient for people to walk, bike and ride public transit. These spaces also offer an opportunity for equitable transit-oriented development to ensure that everyone in our communities' benefits from this generational investment. Our community is also seeking a USDOT Pilot Program for Transit-Oriented Development (TOD) Planning Grant for the West Broad BRT to help us complete a capacity, economic, and market analysis for transit stops on the corridor. In addition, in 2022, COTA was awarded a Regional Infrastructure Accelerator Grant from the Build America Bureau. The West Broad Street BRT Corridor is also in the CIG pipeline in project development.

These milestones were only possible due to the strong partnership and commitment of COTA, the City of

Columbus, Mid-Ohio Regional Planning Commission, and Franklin County. We believe that the transformational impact that the West Broad BRT will make in our community perfectly aligns with both the Capital Construction and Regional Partnership Challenge Grant components of the NAE Grant. Our organization wholeheartedly encourages USDOT to fund this application and thank you for your consideration.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in blue ink, appearing to read "Bob Leighty". The signature is fluid and cursive, with the first name "Bob" and the last name "Leighty" clearly distinguishable.

Bob Leighty
Executive Director, Steelton Rising