

March 12, 2021



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

**Re: Support for the Columbus Crossroads INFRA Application**

Dear Secretary Buttigieg:

On behalf of MKSK, Inc., I am writing this letter to express our strong support for, and to reinforce the strong regional support for, the joint City of Columbus and Ohio Department of Transportation (ODOT) INFRA grant application for Phase 4 of the Columbus Crossroads (I-70/71) project.

MKSK is a Planning, Landscape Architecture, and Urban Design firm with more than 90 employees in eight offices spread across the mid-west and mid-south with our headquarters in Columbus, Ohio – a very short walk from this project. Our firm is also involved in many Public/Private initiatives in this community and state. We have a first-hand understanding of the importance of continued infrastructure investment in the vitality of our entire community. As you and your department are well aware, and as we see regularly in our projects, our country has the opportunity to repair the impacts our interstate system originally created in the fabric and psyche of our cities and neighborhoods. From its inception, this Columbus Crossroads project set out to not just rebuild and improve the safety of this interstate system passing through downtown Columbus, but also repair and reconnect the adjacent neighborhoods with our increasingly revitalizing downtown. This project is the next planned phase of an effort that has already made great strides in this regard.

We firmly believe that the approach being applied to the Columbus Crossroads project is a model for cities across the country. Rather than build one very expensive mega-cap that serves and connects just one part of a city, the Columbus/ODOT approach is to distribute enhancement funding equitably throughout the project to improve each bridge crossing to every neighborhood around the innerbelt. This approach was based upon substantial community input and is resulting in better connections for every neighborhood with bridges that are safer, better serve pedestrians and bicyclists, improve aesthetics, screen the freeway, add landscape and sustainability components, and include community identity that is unique to and reflects each neighborhood. Being selected for an INFRA grant will help advance this critically important effort

Columbus Crossroads is a community-led \$1.3 billion, multi-phase project to transform the crossroads of Interstates 70 and 71. The project improves one of the key corridors of the National Primary Highway Freight System; while at the same time leveraging this infrastructure investment to help restore and reconnect communities that were adversely impacted, first by redlining and second by constructing I-70 and I-71. Current and future phases of work, including Phase 4, from this multi-phase project are now integrated within ODOT's Downtown Ramp Up construction project.

Phase 4 is a \$230 million sub-phase focused on the freeway mainline in the physical overlap of I-70 and I-71; as well as the surface streets surrounding it, and the bridges spanning it. The freeway mainline in the overlap serves commuter traffic from across the state and freight traffic from across the nation. The overlap carries 130,000 vehicles per day – including 17,100 commercial vehicles – and exceeds its design capacity by 50,000 vehicles. As a result, this area contains three of Ohio’s top ten freeway crash locations. The overlap’s trench also creates a physical barrier between Downtown Columbus and the neighborhoods south of the overlap. While this major investment will replace obsolete highway infrastructure, Columbus Crossroads will also restore connections, build ladders of opportunity, transform communities, and extend the revitalization of Downtown Columbus and the surrounding neighborhoods.

ODOT, the City of Columbus, the Mid-Ohio Regional Planning Commission (MORPC), and a diverse group of community stakeholders and business entities have collaborated over the last decade to develop and implement this comprehensive vision. Before I-71 was built in the 1960s, the King-Lincoln District, adjacent to downtown, bustled with 63,000 people and was the center of culture, commerce, civic life, and church in the African American community. By 2000, the neighborhood had dwindled down to just 16,000 residents, only 21 percent of the people in this area owned their homes, one in five were out of work, and nearly half lived in poverty. In 2014, Phase 1 of the Columbus Crossroads project restored the connection to the King-Lincoln District with the Long Street Bridge and Cultural Wall – one of the most revered pieces of infrastructure in all of the City. In 2016, USDOT believed that the Columbus Crossroads Project was of such national significance that the Long Street Bridge and Cultural Wall was featured on the cover of the FY2017 USDOT Budget. Then Secretary Anthony Foxx wrote, “This effort to reconnect and revitalize a community divided by past transportation policies is a compelling example of how transportation can create or eliminate opportunity gaps in our Nation.”

Phase 4’s bridge and surface street components continue this tradition, as the sub-phase is focused on restoring connections across the interstate to Southside neighborhoods as well as improving the built environment surrounding the project area. This phase will include planting new street trees throughout the project area; supporting new EV charging stations along the NHS; constructing a cap on both sides of the High Street bridge and the Third Street bridge; and adding improved bicycle and pedestrian facilities to the Fourth Street bridge. The City and ODOT will also do extensive engagement and provide locations within the project limits for public art that are meaningful to the community. Furthermore, Phase 4 complements the \$28 million the City is investing in Livingston Avenue (a street that is parallel and adjacent to this interstate overlap) to build complete streets, improve safety, and provide better access to both Southside neighborhoods and Nationwide Children’s Hospital, which is one of the top children’s health facilities in the nation.

We respectfully request that the U.S. Department of Transportation consider the importance of these improvements to the restoration of our communities, the prosperity of our region and state, and the resiliency of the national interstate highway system; and we urge your consideration of the application.

Sincerely,  
MKSK, Inc.



Brian P. Kinzelman, FASLA, AICP, LEED AP  
Principal