

HENRY C. "HANK" JOHNSON, JR.
4TH DISTRICT, GEORGIA

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Congress of the United States
House of Representatives
Washington, DC 20515-1004

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NATIONAL SECURITY
ECONOMIC AND CONSUMER POLICY

February 4, 2022

Russell R. McMurry, P.E.
Commissioner
Georgia Department of Transportation
One Georgia Center
600 West Peachtree NW Atlanta, GA 30308

Dear Commissioner McMurry:

I am writing to share my significant concerns regarding the Georgia Department of Transportation's (GDOT) planned expansion of the I-20 and I-285 interchange east of Atlanta. I am requesting a detailed description of how this project complies with Title VI of the Civil Rights Act of 1964, the National Environmental Policy Act (NEPA) and federal executive orders 12898 and 14008, and how this project and GDOT will support plans for heavy rail and high-capacity bus rapid transit in the corridor. Finally, I am requesting an analysis of the project's impact on overall mobility in the corridor and an assessment of its impact on greenhouse gas emissions and other air pollution.

The proposed I-20/I-285 East Interchange expansion will adversely impact property values and health outcomes for the Black and minority population that resides in the area by adding new lanes and access roads, expanding the highway significantly closer to homes in the surrounding area, and increasing the noise and air pollution from the roadway. Further, I am deeply concerned about the potential for this planned interchange expansion to make it more difficult, if not impossible, to expand heavy rail public transit through this corridor that has been long sought by the local community, and promised by the region. As a result, I am concerned that the project reflects an outdated road-centric approach that focuses solely on reducing traffic congestion through new roadway capacity rather than improving overall mobility for area residents which has been shown to more effectively addresses congestion.

The project is located in south DeKalb County, which I represent, and which is majority Black and other people of color. These hardworking people must too often travel to other parts of the county or region to access jobs. Those who are able to afford to drive suffer some of the worst congestion and travel times in the country, while those who are unable to drive have significantly reduced access to jobs and opportunity as a result of inadequate transit, pedestrian, and cyclist infrastructure.

Since the 1970s, the residents of south DeKalb County have financially supported the Metropolitan Atlanta Rapid Transit Authority (MARTA) despite the fact that there is no heavy rail service in the southern part of DeKalb County. In 2012, MARTA adopted a Locally Preferred Alternative for high-capacity transit service in this area. The Locally Preferred Alternative includes an extension of the heavy rail line and bus rapid transit service, and both proposed transit lines would use the I-20/I-285 East Interchange that GDOT plans to modify. The proposed interchange expansion project will utilize right of

way necessary for the proposed transit service, thereby making it more difficult and more expensive, and potentially impossible to construct these transit projects in the future—unless it accommodates them now.

Title VI of the Civil Rights Act of 1964 requires that no person in the United States, based on race, color, or national origin, be excluded from participation in, denied the benefits of, or otherwise subjected to discrimination under any program that DOT financially assists. NEPA and USDOT regulations require projects to mitigate their impacts on the environment and environmental justice. Executive Order 12898 directs federal agencies to identify and address disproportionately high and adverse human health or environmental effects of their actions on low-income communities and communities of color, to the greatest extent practicable and permitted by law. Executive Order 14008 sets out additional environmental justice review obligations for federal agencies, including reviews related to directing federal investments to support clean transit to vulnerable communities.

According to the project's Environmental Assessment (EA), residents adjacent to the I-20/I-285 East Interchange project are predominantly people of color. In fact, every Census Tract in the project area is at least 87% people of color and many are over 98%. Given this demographic information, I am concerned that the EA's review of the project's impact on environmental justice is cursory and superficial. It asserts that the project will not divide or create barriers between communities, despite the fact that the project adds lanes and access roads to an enormous interchange and two major interstates that have already divided them. In addressing the project's impact on air quality, the EA contends that the project will not cause the entire region to violate the federal air quality standard for air pollutants. However, the document fails to evaluate the localized increase in air pollution that the project will cause due to increased vehicle travel. This area already has elevated levels of particulate matter air pollution¹ and this pollution is endured almost exclusively by people of color. I am deeply concerned about the quality and veracity of any Title VI Civil Rights compliance review, NEPA review, or environmental justice executive order review process, which relies on such deficient analysis and ignores the negative impacts to the surrounding community of color.

The Atlanta region already faces some of the worst congestion in the nation. Despite decades of highway and road construction and expansion, this congestion has only increased. This is because of induced demand, a proven² phenomenon wherein a 10 percent increase in lane miles leads to a 10 percent increase in driving. This results in a newly constructed or expanded roadway rapidly becoming congested, and associated increases in regional congestion and emissions. This phenomenon is borne out by the EA, which anticipates that the project will lead to more vehicles on the road and that the interchange will remain congested even with the project. A project that worsens pollution, fails to remove congestion, and makes it more difficult to build proposed transit expansion projects in the corridor seems like a particularly ineffective use of federal transportation funds.

Our nation is facing the dual crises of climate change and inequity. As Secretary of Transportation Buttigieg has noted numerous times, America's overreliance on highways and driving has contributed to both crises, and we cannot solve either without changing how we invest in infrastructure. The transportation sector is now the leading source of greenhouse gas emissions in the United States.³ Yet

¹*Atlanta Roadside Emissions Exposure Study*, Atlanta Regional Commission (2016)

<https://atlregional.github.io/DASH/arees.html>

² <https://www.sciencedirect.com/science/article/abs/pii/S0967070X18301720?via%3Dihub>

³ <https://www.epa.gov/ghgemissions/sources-greenhouse-gas-emissions>

GDOT falls short of addressing the challenge of climate change, both by designing a project that will encourage more driving and by failing to evaluate the project's contribution to the region's transportation emissions in the EA. GDOT is uniquely poised to demonstrate leadership on the climate crisis by incorporating greenhouse gas emissions into its design for projects like the I-20/I-285 Interchange and by pursuing projects that reduce the region's transportation emission. We cannot address the transportation sector's contribution to the climate crisis by encouraging more driving and making it more difficult to expand public transit.

I thank you for your consideration and your careful review of these concerns.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "Hank Johnson". The signature is written in a cursive, flowing style.

Henry C. "Hank" Johnson
Member of Congress

Cc: The Honorable Pete Buttigieg, Secretary, US Department of Transportation