



THE CITY OF NEW YORK  
OFFICE OF THE COMPTROLLER  
SCOTT M. STRINGER

April 15, 2021

Pete Buttigieg  
U.S. Secretary of Transportation  
U.S. Department of Transportation  
1200 New Jersey Avenue, SE  
Washington, DC 20590

Dear Secretary Buttigieg:

Congratulations on your appointment as Transportation Secretary and good luck with the enormous responsibilities that await you. To date, the plans and pronouncements you have announced have been ambitious and encouraging, recognizing that investments in transit, pedestrian, and bicycle infrastructure are critical for a more sustainable, healthy, and equitable future. In New York City, these various transit modes are central to our daily life and the vitality of our city. We trust that your arrival at the U.S. Department of Transportation will bode well for the five boroughs.

Towards that end, I write to offer some initial requests and recommendations that would be deeply impactful to New York City's future.

First, I was encouraged by your recent remarks regarding the inequities and environmental damages of highway building in our country. Creating a fund to scale back highways and rebuild neighborhoods that have been divided by these concrete gashes is wise and urgent. As you may know, my office developed a sweeping plan to scale down a section of the Brooklyn-Queens Expressway (Interstate-278), limiting it exclusively to truck access and building a two-mile linear park. This type of visioning and planning is needed across our city, particularly in neighborhoods where highway infrastructure is linked to poor air quality, high asthma rates, and related environmental and health inequities. I believe that we need to take a comprehensive look at the 250 miles of highway in New York City, scaling back, removing, repurposing, and capping over many of these thoroughfares, and a Federal fund of this kind could help us do exactly that.

In addition to a new federal funding stream to right these wrongs, I also encourage members of your staff to convene a joint taskforce with the New York State and New York City Departments of Transportation to develop a comprehensive plan for the five boroughs. From Congestion Pricing to the 14th Street Busway, from Vision Zero to our plaza program, from the newly announced bike lane on the Brooklyn Bridge to our investments in bike infrastructure – time and again measures pursued by New York City have inspired cities around the country. As such, a

joint effort to dramatically scale back New York City highways and make necessary investments in public transit would have huge, positive ripple effects across the country.

Second, I believe that it is time to look beyond capital support for public transit agencies and begin investing in annual operating grants. The Federal DOT already does this for a handful of small bus agencies and should extend this funding to those as large as New York City's Metropolitan Transportation Authority (MTA). Our subway, bus, and commuter rail lines desperately need better mid-day, early morning, evening, and weekend service – especially since many of those who work outside of traditional 9-to-5 office hours do not have the luxury of working from home. As part of this program, annual operating grants to transit agencies should require an explicit reform to service standards so that there is a credible commitment to use these dollars exclusively for service improvements.

Third, I am encouraged by the Federal Aviation Administration's recent rule change which will allow airport Passenger Facility Charges to be used toward the construction of rail lines that do not exclusively serve the airport. This is particularly meaningful in New York City, given recent efforts to build a rail connection to LaGuardia Airport. The FAA is currently reviewing the Port Authority's AirTrain proposal and found that the Authority "arbitrarily and unevenly applied criteria" to screen out alternatives like extending the N/W transit line, optimizing bus service and existing transit, or ferry service. Given a) this recent revelation, b) the FAA rule change, and c) the lack of ADA accessibility at the Mets-Willets Point Subway Station that connects to the proposed AirTrain, I hope the FAA will give a harder look to the Port Authority proposal and more strongly consider the extension of the N Train subway line to LaGuardia as an alternative and place a greater emphasis on issues of accessibility.

Fourth, your Agency's Draft Strategic Plan on Accessible Transportation was very encouraging and I request that you move forward with these measures as soon as possible. Creating a simple, streamlined grant program for subway station ADA retrofits would be transformative in New York City, where three-quarters of stations are inaccessible to those with long-term disabilities and injuries, as well as parents with young children.

And last, across the nation, metropolitan areas are squandering a major rail asset and locking local residents out of a high-speed and sustainable transportation mode: commuter rail. Instead of exclusively serving suburbanites working in downtown office buildings, major cities in Europe and Asia have long integrated these lines into their urban transportation network, with unified fares across rail, subway, and bus systems and regular all-day service. From New York City and New Jersey to San Francisco and Los Angeles, a U.S. DOT funding stream dedicated to integrating and modernizing commuter rail is perhaps the quickest and most cost-effective method for radically improving urban transit in the United States.

Thank you so much for your consideration. The future of our cities, the future of our country, and the future of our planet depend on your swift and purposeful actions.

Sincerely,



Scott M. Stringer  
New York City Comptroller