



August 1, 2023

The Honorable Pete Buttigieg
Secretary of Transportation
United States Department of Transportation
1200 New Jersey Avenue SE
Washington, DC 20590

Subject: Letter of Support – Blatnik Bridge Reconstruction Project
Mega Program & Bridge Investment Program (BIP) Funding Applications

Dear Secretary Buttigieg:

On behalf of the Wisconsin Paper Council, I am pleased to submit this letter of support for the joint Minnesota and Wisconsin Departments of Transportation applications for federal funding for the Blatnik Bridge Reconstruction Project under the Mega Program and the Bridge Investment Program (BIP).

The Blatnik Bridge is one of two bridges that connects Duluth, Minnesota to Superior, Wisconsin, carrying I-535 across the St. Louis Bay. This project will replace the entire Blatnik Bridge structure to restore it to good structural condition, modernize the approaching interchange, and ensure the bridge's long-term operations and safety. Many industries, employers, health care patients, students, shoppers, commuters, and tourists depend on the Blatnik Bridge to deliver their goods and services and provide access to jobs, hospitals, and other destinations in Duluth, Superior, and the surrounding region. As such, replacing this bridge is a top priority for both states.

This bridge is an important freight and commercial connection between the Twin Ports and for the Upper Midwest region. The Blatnik Bridge is essential to the functioning and success of the national shipping industry, as the project serves commerce through the international multi-modal Port of Duluth-Superior. The Port of Duluth-Superior is the largest U.S. port on the Great Lakes and one of the largest marine gateways for U.S. trade with Canada, the number-one trade partner of Minnesota and the nation. The port is located on the western tip of Lake Superior and the St. Lawrence Seaway, one of the nation's principal USMCA trade corridors.

Improvements made to the bridge will bring further economic success to the port and regional economy, and strengthen the national supply chain as the Port of Duluth-Superior is 17th largest port in the U.S.



This project will improve the poor conditions of the bridge by completely replacing all structural elements of the bridge and ensuring it is resilient to weather and climate threats. Inefficient and dangerous traffic operations will also improve, with a redesigned bridge span and Wisconsin approach that has a high crash history. Additionally, this project provides the opportunity to add strongly supported bicycle and pedestrian facilities to the Blatnik Bridge, improving non-vehicle mobility and recreation.

This project's improvements are consistent with both the BIP and Mega Program goals and grant criteria. The BIP grant carefully considers projects that improve the condition of bridges as well as the safety, efficiency, and reliability of the movement of people and freight over bridges. The proposed transportation improvements will greatly improve safety and mobility on the Blatnik Bridge and improve access to and from regional businesses—especially the downtowns of Duluth and Superior and the Port of Duluth-Superior.

These improvements will not only encourage regional economic growth but also strengthen the reliability of the transportation network that serves hundreds of communities across northern Minnesota and Wisconsin and expanding nationally.

The initiatives within this grant application will help support the livelihoods of the 30,000 men and women who work in the forest products industry by providing safe, reliable and accessible transportation options for our supply chain.

Thank you for your consideration and approval of this application.

Sincerely,

Shawn Brantmeier
Director of Operations
Wisconsin Paper Council

CC: Wisconsin Department of Transportation
Wisconsin Paper Council Board of Directors Chairperson