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September 3, 2021

Mr. Scott Alexander
Project Manager, Virginia Department of Transportation,
811 Commerce Road,
Staunton, VA 24401-9029

Re: Interstate 81 Staunton Widening

SENT VIA EMAIL TO Scott.Alexander@VDOT.Virginia.gov

Thank you for the opportunity to comment on the proposed widening project in Staunton.

Alliance for the Shenandoah Valley is a regional nonprofit, working to conserve the natural resources, cultural heritage and rural character of our region. We were formed in 2018 from a merger of four long-standing county-based conservation groups, and we have been working to promote sensible improvements on the I-81 corridor for more than two decades.

This Staunton segment is the first major project from the Corridor Improvement Project (CIP) to move forward in our service area. We participated extensively in the CIP process and ultimately supported the CIP in the legislature. In contrast to previous proposals, like the Star Solutions proposal and the 2007 I-81 Corridor Improvement Study, which focused almost exclusively on wholesale widening through the corridor, the I-81 CIP focused on targeted safety and congestion problems and included public input. And although we found the final project list to be overly reliant on widening, we found it to be a much-improved approach.

We recognize that this Staunton segment is one of the most troublesome for safety and that significant improvements are needed. And while we generally advocate for alternatives to highway widening, we appreciate that this proposed project would occur in the existing right of way.

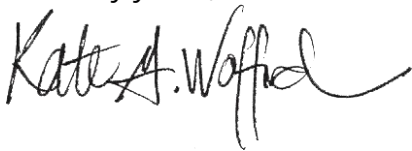
As this project moves forward, we encourage VDOT to increase its focus on operational improvements to help alleviate safety issues. Speed enforcement is particularly important in this area. Also, improvements which accelerate the clearing of accidents will considerably improve this stretch of the corridor. Long clearance times not only cause problems for motorists on the interstate, they are terribly disruptive for communities and neighborhoods on local roads where traffic is diverted.

We also encourage you to recommit to the excellent public engagement that you conducted during the Corridor Improvement Plan process in 2018. Since the CIP process concluded, we have found it difficult to access upcoming meetings and recent actions of the I-81 Corridor Advisory Committee. We understand that COVID has been challenging for public engagement, but we hope that the accessibility and transparency will improve in the future.

In closing, we highlight the fact that the Shenandoah Valley is characterized by its beauty, its rich history, and its farming culture. Leading economic sectors, including agriculture, tourism, and outdoor recreation, rely on the protection of these resources. Projects on I-81 have significant consequences for the Valley, and we urge you to take a context sensitive approach on this and future projects.

Thank you for your consideration of our comments.

Sincerely yours,

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "Kate G. Wofford". The signature is fluid and cursive, with a long horizontal flourish extending to the right.

Kate G. Wofford
Executive Director