

Oct. 7, 2022

Faith Hall  
Grant Lead, Reconnecting Communities Pilot Program  
U.S. Department of Transportation  
1200 New Jersey Ave, SE  
Washington, DC 20590

RE: Letter of Support for the 2022 RCP Program:  
Reconnecting Milwaukee – Reimagining WIS 175 Feasibility Study, (Milwaukee, WI)

Dear Ms. Hall:

I am writing on behalf of the American Civil Liberties Union of Wisconsin Foundation (ACLU-WI). We support the Wisconsin Department of Transportation's (WisDOT) application for funding through the United States Department of Transportation's (USDOT) Reconnecting Communities Pilot (RCP) Discretionary Grant Program. The ACLU-WI is deeply involved in working for racial justice – including, for at least the past two decades, environmental justice and transportation equity. In that vein, the ACLU-WI has long advocated against urban highways that have divided and burdened inner-city Milwaukee. RCP funding would facilitate the Reconnecting Milwaukee – Reimagining WIS 175 Feasibility Study to evaluate options for reconnecting communities in Milwaukee that are currently divided by the 1.5-mile stretch of WIS 175 from Wisconsin Avenue to Lisbon Avenue.

Highway 175 is a remnant of a larger highway plan that never fully materialized and poses safety and operational issues through high crash rates and peak hour delays; mobility issues for local traffic, bicycles, pedestrians. It also creates a physical barrier that hampers cultural, business, and everyday connectivity for the 19 surrounding neighborhoods and the nearly 51,000 residents located within one mile of the project corridor.

This barrier enables, if not exacerbates, racial segregation in Milwaukee. The Milwaukee-Waukesha area is the second-most segregated metropolitan area in the country,<sup>1</sup> and the neighborhoods on the northern border of 175 reflect that intense segregation. For example, 71% of the residents of the Washington Park neighborhood are Black and 17% are Asian, and 52% of the residents of the Walnut Hill neighborhood are Black and 34% are Asian. White residents make up only four percent and two percent, respectively, of the populations of these neighborhoods. Yet directly across 175 from those two neighborhoods, sits Washington Heights, a neighborhood that is 65% white.<sup>2</sup> The map below graphically illustrates that segregation.<sup>3</sup>

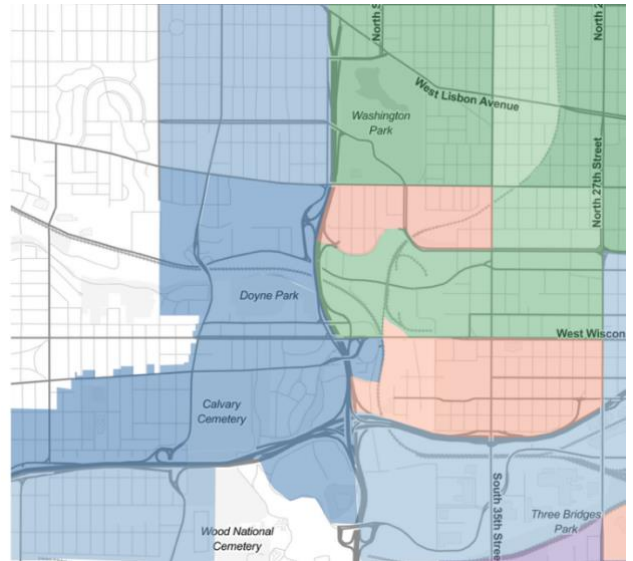
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<sup>1</sup> John Johnson, *Neighborhoods Where Milwaukee Isn't Segregated*, Feb. 9, 2022, <https://law.marquette.edu/facultyblog/2022/02/neighborhoods-where-milwaukee-isnt-segregated/>.

<sup>2</sup> *Id.*

<sup>3</sup> *Id.*

The Feasibility Study aims to reconnect these communities harmed by transportation infrastructure, and thereby benefit the communities of color east of 175. We also believe the study needs to evaluate and ensure some form of community benefit agreement for these communities. This all clearly aligns with the Biden-Harris Administration's policies and priorities, as well as with USDOT's strategic goals for the RCP program. The study will focus on safety, economic strength, equity, climate and sustainability, transformation, and organizational excellence and is seeking funds to conduct community-supported planning activities. The project will support and engage economically disadvantaged and traditionally underserved communities to increase affordable, accessible, and multimodal access to daily destinations. The study is a partnership between various agencies and advocacy groups to further evaluate, incorporate comprehensive engagement input, and create innovative alternatives that blend the needs of all parties and modes of transportation, and to develop a land use strategy that spurs economic development of the region.



Majority Black neighborhoods are shaded green, majority white shaded blue, majority Latinx shaded purple, and least segregated neighborhood shaded orange.

We commend USDOT for recognizing the need to reconnect communities by reimagining transportation facilities. The needs are immense, and there are multiple governmental agencies and nonprofit organizations working together towards a better-connected Milwaukee. WisDOT, the Menomonee Valley Partners, and the Housing Authority of Milwaukee are aware and supportive of one another's applications. Indeed, funding these proposals would make an even greater impact towards removing physical and socioeconomic barriers within the City of Milwaukee, which is one of the most racially segregated cities in the country.

We also support WisDOT's application for the funding of Reconnecting Milwaukee – Reimagining WIS 175 Feasibility Study and looks forward to the infrastructure investment in our region through the Bipartisan Infrastructure Law. Please give this 2022 RCP funding proposal your full consideration.

Sincerely,

Amanda Merkwae  
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ACLU of Wisconsin  
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