

**Secretary Pete Buttigieg**  
**Senate Appropriations Committee Opening Testimony**  
**November 20, 2024**

Chair Murray, Vice Chairman Collins, and members of the committee—thank you for this opportunity to speak with you today alongside my colleagues in the Biden-Harris Administration.

A month ago, I was in North Carolina and Tennessee visiting communities impacted by Hurricane Helene. I saw entire lanes of I-40 demolished and collapsed into the gorge below, washed out by heavy rainfall made stronger and more destructive by climate change. I spoke to families, small business owners, and community leaders about how this catastrophic storm has impacted their lives and livelihoods and what they need—in the short term and for the long haul. And I met with the first responders who have been working tirelessly to help the people in these communities as they contend with the loss of homes, the loss of businesses, and the loss of life.

In the weeks since Hurricanes Helene and Milton, the Biden-Harris Administration has continued to direct extensive, well-coordinated support to the communities devastated by these storms. We're working alongside state and local governments, non-profit groups, and volunteer organizations in the ongoing response and recovery efforts. We've also been working to combat an increasingly common and unequivocally harmful part of life in the 21st century: the rapid spread of misinformation and disinformation across social media—which in this case included the work the Federal Aviation Administration does to facilitate response and recovery while keeping our airspace safe and secure.

As of today, the US Department of Transportation (USDOT)—through the Federal Highway Administration (FHWA) Emergency Relief Program—has delivered \$187 million in funding to communities in North Carolina, South Carolina, Tennessee, and Virginia, as well the Federal Land Management Agencies in these states to support immediate needs.

These funds are being put to immediate use to get roads and bridges repaired and reopened, and deal with disruptions in the meantime. Already, we've seen how these funds are facilitating recovery efforts: helping reopen US 276 near Caesars Head in Greenville County, South Carolina, and continuing the ongoing work along I-26 and I-40 between North Carolina and Tennessee to restore access to these critical roads.

As valuable as this work is, the present reality is that our Department will soon lack the funding to address additional needs resulting from the recent hurricanes and other prior disasters, as well as needs from future storms or other disasters. That's because the amount of FHWA emergency relief funding being requested from numerous states far exceeds the amount of money that is available.

Hurricane Helene recovery alone will require extensive, ongoing investment to permanently rebuild the roads and bridges that were destroyed by the storm. Meanwhile, we continue to have unmet need for recovery in states like Alaska, Hawaii, Maryland, and Nevada that qualify for FHWA funding to rebuild transportation infrastructure after other recent disasters. With each passing day, we're growing closer to a situation where this Department will not be able to provide even partial funding to eligible projects in the future.

Consider communities in Arkansas, California, and Oklahoma that have been impacted by floods, tornadoes, and wildfires, or the Francis Scott Key Bridge in Maryland, or the Teton Pass in Wyoming. We

currently lack the funds to permanently rebuild the infrastructure in these communities and many others across the country, even though they are eligible.

President Biden requested approximately \$8.1 billion for the FHWA's Emergency Relief Program. These funds would cover the backlog of projects waiting for funding as well as the needs of states from Helene and Milton. I would also like to note that in addition to funding for the FHWA program, President Biden has also requested \$57 million for the Federal Transit Administration's (FTA) Public Transportation Emergency Relief Program to assist transit agencies that were impacted by, and supported local response efforts during, Helene, Milton, and other disasters.

Today there is an urgent need for Congress to act to provide supplemental funding to support communities across this country that are grappling with disasters.

This would not be the first time Congress has risen to the occasion to provide additional and necessary funding to support Americans impacted by disasters. We saw it, for instance, after Hurricanes Katrina, Rita, and Wilma in 2005 and more recently in 2018 following Hurricanes Harvey, Irma, Maria. Now the American people—including the communities in North Carolina and South Carolina, in Virginia and Tennessee, in Florida and Georgia that are still reeling from the hurricanes--need you to act.

As we gather today to discuss the federal response after a catastrophic weather event, we also know that investing in resilient infrastructure up front can save lives and reduce the cost of rebuilding. That is why USDOT prioritizes resilient infrastructure in all its discretionary grant programs—and through the PROTECT program, created through the Bipartisan Infrastructure Law, we are deploying the first ever formula and discretionary funds dedicated to making our infrastructure more resilient.

We're seeing the reality of climate change in real time. Weather events that were previously deemed "once in a century" are coming along every few years. This is not a fluke or coincidence, and most importantly, this is not going to go away. We need adequate and sustained funding to make sure our communities have what they need to rebuild roads and bridges... to make them more resilient in the face of extreme weather and other disasters... and to help people return to normal life as quickly as possible.

With your partnership, I know we can deliver the critical support that's needed right now: for our transportation infrastructure... for farmers and ranchers dealing with crop losses... and for families and small business owners who need to rebuild their homes, and schools, and storefronts.

Thank you for welcoming me here today. I look forward to working alongside you as we help these communities recover—and build back stronger and more resilient for the future.