April 10, 2017

The Honorable Elaine L. Chao
Secretary
U.S. Department of Transportation
1200 New Jersey Avenue, SE
Washington, D.C. 20590

Via electronic and postal delivery

Dear Madam Secretary:

I am writing to share my perspective on the Southwest Light Rail Transit (LRT) project in the Minneapolis-St. Paul Metropolitan Area. I also want to rebut a March 17, 2017 letter sent to you by some members of the Minnesota House and Senate majority caucuses. The Southwest LRT has broad support among community members; local, state and federal officials; and the business community.

The Southwest LRT project is the result of 30 years of planning, routing, design, and impact analysis. It has received hundreds of hours of community meetings and thousands of public comments, which have informed the route and project details. The cities and county along the route have voted their support several times and have committed 43.3 percent of the total project cost. The Minnesota Legislature has appropriated $30.3 million through three different appropriations, and a regional body, the Metropolitan Council, has committed to financing the remaining gap to meet the State’s 50 percent total project share. The State and the local communities are committed to splitting the operating costs, as we have for other transitways in this metropolitan area. I will protect those longstanding commitment during my remaining 21 months as Governor.

As the March 17th legislative letter indicates, there is not unanimous support for the project. However, most of its signatories do not represent the Minneapolis-St. Paul Metropolitan Area. Notably, the three Republican legislators, who represent districts along the proposed route, did not sign that letter to you.

The Southwest LRT will travel from downtown Minneapolis through four suburban communities – a portion of the most populous and employment-rich part of the Metropolitan Area. There are already 64,300 jobs within one-half mile of the 15 planned Southwest LRT stations, and another 16,600 jobs are expected to be added by 2035. Three of Minnesota’s 17 Fortune 500 companies: United Health, CH Robinson, and Supervalu, are located along the proposed route. In addition, Park Nicollet Hospital, Optum Corporate Headquarters, the Opus Business Park and Golden Triangle Business Park are also served directly by the line.
The Southwest LRT Project has already experienced over $515 million in development underway or planned along the route. Development highlights include a mix of projects around the planned West Lake Street Station in Minneapolis, over 1 million square feet of office space around the City West Station in Eden Prairie, and a new proposed 332-unit residential housing near Opus Station.

The Southwest LRT project enjoys the strong support of the major business organizations, who represent businesses along the line, including the Minneapolis Downtown Council, the Minneapolis Regional Chamber of Commerce, the Twin West Chamber of Commerce, and the 2020 Partnership, a leading public-private coalition committed to economic development in the region.

Minnesota is making final preparations to apply for a full funding grant agreement with the Federal Transit Administration. I am confident that the Southwest LRT will not only meet the expectations of the overall medium-high rating it has received from the FTA, but will also exceed the projections for ridership and the economic betterment of this region. The first two light rail projects, the METRO Blue Line and Green Line have surpassed expectations for ridership and development. The Green Line regularly approaches or breaks 2030 ridership projections with an average weekday ridership of 39,400 and recently topped $5.1 billion in private development within a half mile of stations along the line.

This project is crucial to the economic future of Minnesota’s largest metropolitan area and the entire state. The Twin Cities Metropolitan Region expects to grow by 800,000 residents and 500,000 employees between 2010 and 2040. Its current bus transit system is as much as 50 years old and does not have the capacity to support that level of growth. The Southwest LRT is one of the major new transitways being developed to meet the demands of our businesses, residents, and communities.

I respectfully ask that you encourage President Trump and Congress to retain the Capital Investment Grant Program, under which this project would receive federal funding, and also to approve its application, when it is submitted.

Thank you for your consideration of my requests.

Sincerely,

Mark Dayton
Governor

My best to you!