

October 3, 2022

Secretary Pete Buttigieg
U.S. Department of Transportation
1200 New Jersey Avenue, SE
Washington, DC 20590

RE: Letter of Support – Salt Lake City ‘Reconnecting Communities’ Planning Grant

Dear Secretary Buttigieg:

As one of the authors of the Rio Grande Plan, I write in support of Salt Lake City’s initiative to address east-west connections across the I-15 and north-south rail corridors, particularly for people walking, biking, and taking transit.

For me, this is a personal issue. Our close family friends live on the opposite side of the railroad tracks from us. We would love to let our children walk to their house along the new 9-Line pedestrian trail. However, the trail has a conspicuous gap at the railroad crossing, where freight trains often stop to switch cars, or commuter trains come flying through at 80 mph. Even as enthusiastic pedestrians and cyclists, we do not feel safe making this trip without our car. And we are far from alone. The east-west divide in Salt Lake City is very real, whether we acknowledge it or not.

Similar to your initiative to turn the old Studebaker plant in South Bend into a community asset, we believe the right way to improve our infrastructure is to reuse our historic assets in a way consistent with our 21st century values. In our Rio Grande Plan, we propose lowering the offending railroad tracks into a below-grade trench through the core of the city in order to return rail access to the historic Rio Grande Depot. Though the price for such a solution would be high, we believe the benefits greatly outweigh the costs. Improvements would include the closure of 4 busy railroad crossings, closure of 2 at-grade crossings for major pedestrian trails, the opening of 50 acres of industrial land to new uses (including affordable housing), and the restoration of a historic city icon: Rio Grande Depot.

I support Salt Lake City’s grant application to the ‘Reconnecting Communities’ grant to conduct feasibility study for several solutions for better community connections, including the Rio Grande Plan. The time is right. The public demand is there for better, fairer transportation options. We have the will; we only lack the means.

Sincerely,

Christian Lenhart, PE
Resident of Salt Lake City and co-author of the Rio Grande Plan

