

**Testimony of Shailen Bhatt, Administrator of the Federal Highway Administration**  
**U.S. Department of Transportation**  
**Before the Senate Committee on Environment and Public Works**  
**July 10, 2024**  
**10:00am**

Chairman Carper, Ranking Member Capito, and Members of the Committee, thank you for the opportunity to appear before you today.

Just over three months ago, Baltimore, Maryland, and the entire Nation were shocked by the collapse of the Francis Scott Key Bridge. While the collapse of the bridge itself was distressing, we must not lose sight of the devastating impact this tragedy has had on the victims and their families. The six victims were fathers, husbands, and friends in their homes and communities, and they were valued members of the construction workforce. We will always mourn these six individuals who gave their lives to strengthen our transportation system. I also want to thank all of the emergency responders who acted quickly to save lives.

Immediately following this catastrophic event, the Federal Highway Administration (FHWA) mobilized internally across multiple offices and externally with local, State, and Federal partners to support the response. Under Secretary Buttigieg's leadership, FHWA coordinated with other operating administrations and offices within the United States Department of Transportation (USDOT); the Maryland Department of Transportation (MDOT), which includes the Maryland Transportation Authority and State Highway Administration; the City of Baltimore; U.S. Coast Guard; the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers; the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration; and others to mitigate supply chain impacts, manage traffic, and safely reopen the port. FHWA remains engaged in ongoing coordination with local, State, and Federal partners in the response efforts. FHWA is actively supporting the National Transportation Safety Board's investigation of the collapse. FHWA's focus now is supporting Maryland as much as possible as they work to reconstruct the bridge. FHWA has been in direct communication with MDOT regarding all possible options for building the bridge and is committed to supporting these efforts so that the bridge can be reconstructed as quickly and safely as possible. President Biden has been clear in this Administration's commitment to reconstructing the bridge. It is critical that we restore this vital connection for people and goods traveling along the East Coast. Ensuring that the I-695 corridor is open, operational, and safe for the traveling public at the earliest possible moment is a top priority.

On March 28<sup>th</sup>, within hours of receiving the request for funding assistance from MDOT, FHWA announced the immediate availability of \$60 million in "quick release" Emergency Relief funds. These funds serve as a down payment toward initial costs, and additional Emergency Relief program funding will be made available as work continues. As of July 3, 2024, \$40 million of this initial \$60 million down payment has been obligated for debris removal work. The Administration is asking Congress to join it in demonstrating a commitment to aid in recovery efforts by authorizing a 100 percent Federal cost share for rebuilding the bridge, consistent with past catastrophic bridge collapses.

Under the law, Emergency Relief funds cannot duplicate assistance under another Federal program or compensation from insurance or any other source. FHWA will follow the law, and the Emergency Relief program will be reimbursed with compensation for damages or with proceeds obtained through applicable insurance. FHWA is coordinating closely with the State of Maryland as it works through the details of its insurance policy.

FHWA continues to provide wide-ranging technical assistance to MDOT regarding procurement for reconstruction operations and project delivery strategies to reconstruct the bridge quickly and safely. The Maryland Transportation Authority issued a progressive design-build contract request for proposals on May 31<sup>st</sup>. FHWA also is working with MDOT to ensure that the new bridge will be built to current design standards and in accordance with all applicable Federal laws. On March 26, 2024, the day of the collapse, FHWA met with the National Transportation Liaisons from the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers, U.S. Coast Guard, U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration, the Advisory Council on Historic Preservation, and the Environmental Protection Agency to discuss each agency's respective emergency procedures and considerations to expedite the environmental review and permitting processes for the future reconstruction. FHWA continues to meet with Federal and State resource agencies to discuss permitting for reconstructing the bridge. A Categorical Exclusion for the replacement of the bridge is expected to be completed by the end of July 2024, and will provide the appropriate level of information to allow for a streamlined permitting approach with the respective resource agencies.

Thanks to the whole-of-government response—and industry and government entities working together—there has been significant progress, including the significant milestone of reopening the Federal channel on June 10, 2024. While there is more work to be done, the coordinated response by government and industry to date gives me great optimism. Thank you to the State, local, and Federal entities who continue to collaborate with FHWA in response to this tragic event.

Whether it is an event of this scale and complexity or the comparatively smaller but still impactful bridge incidents on I-95 in Philadelphia and on I-10 in Los Angeles, I am proud to lead an agency that is playing a part in showing the country what can happen when government and industry come together with a common goal. There are no Democratic roads or Republican bridges—transportation truly unites us.

FHWA will continue to do everything it can to support the response. As the President has said, we will not rest “until the cement has dried on the entirety of a new bridge.”

Thank you again for the opportunity to appear before you today. I would be happy to answer any questions.

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