



July 22, 2020

**VIA EMAIL**

Michael Bell  
FOIA Officer  
Office of the Secretary of Transportation  
1200 New Jersey Ave. SE  
W94-122  
Washington, DC 20590  
[ost.foia@dot.gov](mailto:ost.foia@dot.gov)

**Re: Freedom of Information Act Request**

Dear Michael Bell:

Pursuant to the Freedom of Information Act (FOIA), 5 U.S.C. § 552, and the implementing regulations of your agency, 49 C.F.R. Part 7, American Oversight makes the following request for records.

News reporting based in part on documents released through the FOIA indicates that Department of Transportation (DOT) Secretary Elaine Chao created a “special path” for projects in her home state of Kentucky, and in particular for those favored by her husband, Senate Majority Leader and Kentucky Senator Mitch McConnell.<sup>1</sup> In particular, questions have been raised about a \$67.4 million grant in Boone County, Kentucky, after a process that the Government Accountability Office said lacked “the assurance of fairness.”<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Tucker Doherty & Tanya Snyder, *Chao Created Special Path for McConnell’s Favored Projects*, Politico (June 10, 2019, 5:02 AM),

<https://www.politico.com/story/2019/06/10/mcconnell-elaine-chao-1358068>; see also Tanya Snyder, *Emails Reveal Coordination Between Chao, McConnell*, Politico (Feb. 19, 2019, 5:00 AM), <https://www.politico.com/story/2019/02/19/mitch-mcconnell-elaine-chao-relationship-1163655>.

<sup>2</sup> Tucker Doherty & Tanya Snyder, *Chao’s Team Helped McConnell’s State Win Its Largest DOT Grant*, Politico (Dec. 17, 2019, 5:07 AM),

<https://www.politico.com/news/2019/12/17/chao-mcconnell-transportation-kentucky-086343>.



In addition, in June 2020, DOT awarded a \$55 million grant to the Kentucky Transportation Cabinet for the expansion of Mountain Parkway in Wolfe County, Kentucky—a project that Senator McConnell claimed to have promoted to DOT.<sup>3</sup>

American Oversight seeks documents with the potential to shed light on DOT’s handling of requests from Kentucky, including the grant awarded for the Mountain Parkway project.

### **Requested Records**

American Oversight requests that DOT produce the following records within twenty business days:

1. All email communications (email messages, complete email chains, email attachments, calendar invitations, and calendar invitation attachments) sent by (a) any of the government officials listed below, (b) containing any of the following key terms:

#### Specified DOT Officials:

- a) Secretary Elaine Chao, or anyone communicating on her behalf, such a scheduler or assistant
- b) Chief of Staff Todd Inman
- c) Deputy Chief of Staff Sean McMaster
- d) Assistant Secretary Joel Szabat
- e) Deputy Assistant Secretary Finch Fulton

#### Key Terms:

- a) “Mountain Parkway”
- b) “Mountain Pkwy”
- c) “Kentucky Transportation Cabinet”
- d) KYTC
- e) Wolfe
- f) “\$55M”
- g) “\$55,150,000”
- h) “Raymond Banks”
- i) “Ray Banks”

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<sup>3</sup> Jordan Whitaker, *Expanding Lanes and Opportunity on the Mountain Parkway in Wolfe County*, WYMT (June 16, 2020, 7:21 PM), <https://www.wyvt.com/2020/06/16/mountain-parkway-to-see-expansion-in-wolfe-county/>; Press Release from Kentucky Gov. Andy Beshear and Secretary of Transportation Jim Gray, June 16, 2020, [https://transportation.ky.gov/NewsRoom/Gov.%20Beshear%20Announces%20\\$55%20Million%20Grant%20to%20Expand%20Mountain%20Parkway%20in%20Wolfe%20County.pdf](https://transportation.ky.gov/NewsRoom/Gov.%20Beshear%20Announces%20$55%20Million%20Grant%20to%20Expand%20Mountain%20Parkway%20in%20Wolfe%20County.pdf).

- j) "Bob Hutchison"
- k) Campton
- l) "Hazel Green"
- m) "I-64"
- n) "Interstate 64"
- o) Saylersville
- p) "Andy Barr"
- q) "Rep. Barr"
- r) "Hal Rogers"
- s) "Rep. Rogers"

In an effort to accommodate DOT and reduce the number of potentially responsive records to be processed and produced, American Oversight has limited its request to emails sent by specified custodians. To be clear, however, American Oversight still requests that complete email chains be produced, displaying both sent and received messages. This means, for example, that both Secretary Chao's response to an email and the initial received message are responsive to this request and should be produced.

This request includes all prior messages (whether incoming or outgoing) reflected in the responsive correspondence and any attachments thereto.

Please produce all responsive records from January 1, 2020, through June 30, 2020.

2. All email communications (email messages, complete email chains, email attachments, calendar invitations, and calendar invitation attachments) or text messages between (a) any of the DOT official listed s in Column A below, and (b) any of the individuals or entities listed in Column B below:

Column A: DOT Officials	Column B: Outside Individuals
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>i. Secretary Elaine Chao, or anyone communicating on her behalf, such a scheduler or assistant</li> <li>ii. Chief of Staff Todd Inman</li> <li>iii. Deputy Chief of Staff Sean McMaster</li> <li>iv. Assistant Secretary Joel Szabat</li> <li>v. Deputy Assistant Secretary Finch Fulton</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>i. Wolfe County Judge/Executive Raymond Banks</li> <li>ii. Kentucky Gov. Kentucky Andy Beshear, Transportation Secretary Jim Gray, or any person communicating from an email address ending in ky.gov</li> <li>iii. Rep. Andy Barr or any member of his staff, including Chief of Staff Mary Rosado (<a href="mailto:mary.rosado@mail.house.gov">mary.rosado@mail.house.gov</a>), Legislative Director Hunt Vandertoll (<a href="mailto:hunt.vandertoll@mail.house.gov">hunt.vandertoll@mail.house.gov</a>),</li> </ul>

	<p>and District Director Tatum Dale (<a href="mailto:tatum.dale@mail.house.gov">tatum.dale@mail.house.gov</a>)</p> <p>iv. Rep. Hal Rogers or any member of his staff, including former Chief of Staff Megan Bell (<a href="mailto:megan.bell@mail.house.gov">megan.bell@mail.house.gov</a>), Chief of Staff Jake Johnsen (<a href="mailto:jake.johnsen@mail.house.gov">jake.johnsen@mail.house.gov</a>), Deputy Chief of Staff Chelsea Jarrett (<a href="mailto:chelsea.jarrett@mail.house.gov">chelsea.jarrett@mail.house.gov</a>), Legislative Director Austin Gage (<a href="mailto:austin.gage@mail.house.gov">austin.gage@mail.house.gov</a>) and District Director Karen Kelly</p>
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Please produce all responsive records from January 1, 2020 through June 30, 2020.

**Fee Waiver Request**

In accordance with 5 U.S.C. § 552(a)(4)(A)(iii) and your agency’s regulations, American Oversight requests a waiver of fees associated with processing this request for records. The subject of this request concerns the operations of the federal government, and the disclosures will likely contribute to a better understanding of relevant government procedures by the general public in a significant way. Moreover, the request is primarily and fundamentally for non-commercial purposes.

American Oversight requests a waiver of fees because disclosure of the requested information is “in the public interest because it is likely to contribute significantly to public understanding of operations or activities of the government.”<sup>4</sup> The public has a significant interest in the process by which DOT chooses grant recipients. Records with the potential to shed light on this matter would contribute significantly to public understanding of operations of the federal government, including whether and to what extent DOT favored projects promoted by Senator McConnell. American Oversight is committed to transparency and makes the responses agencies provide to FOIA requests publicly available, and the public’s understanding of the government’s activities would be enhanced through American Oversight’s analysis and publication of these records.

This request is primarily and fundamentally for non-commercial purposes.<sup>5</sup> As a 501(c)(3) nonprofit, American Oversight does not have a commercial purpose and the release of the information requested is not in American Oversight’s financial interest. American Oversight’s mission is to promote transparency in government, to educate the public about government activities, and to ensure the accountability of government officials.

<sup>4</sup> 5 U.S.C. § 552(a)(4)(A)(iii).

<sup>5</sup> See 5 U.S.C. § 552(a)(4)(A)(iii).

American Oversight uses the information gathered, and its analysis of it, to educate the public through reports, press releases, or other media. American Oversight also makes materials it gathers available on its public website and promotes their availability on social media platforms, such as Facebook and Twitter.<sup>6</sup>

American Oversight has also demonstrated its commitment to the public disclosure of documents and creation of editorial content through numerous substantive analyses posted to its website.<sup>7</sup> Examples reflecting this commitment to the public disclosure of documents and the creation of editorial content include the posting of records related to an ethics waiver received by a senior Department of Justice attorney and an analysis of what those records demonstrated regarding the Department's process for issuing such waivers;<sup>8</sup> posting records received as part of American Oversight's "Audit the Wall" project to gather and analyze information related to the administration's proposed construction of a barrier along the U.S.-Mexico border, and analyses of what those records reveal;<sup>9</sup> posting records regarding potential self-dealing at the Department of Housing & Urban Development and related analysis;<sup>10</sup> posting records and analysis relating to the federal government's efforts to sell nuclear technology to Saudi Arabia;<sup>11</sup> and posting records and analysis regarding the Department of Justice's decision in response to demands from Congress to direct a U.S. Attorney to undertake a wide-ranging review and make recommendations regarding criminal investigations relating to the President's

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<sup>6</sup> American Oversight currently has approximately 15,500 page likes on Facebook and 104,300 followers on Twitter. American Oversight, FACEBOOK, <https://www.facebook.com/weareoversight/> (last visited July 21, 2020); American Oversight (@weareoversight), TWITTER, <https://twitter.com/weareoversight> (last visited July 21, 2020).

<sup>7</sup> News, AMERICAN OVERSIGHT, <https://www.americanoversight.org/blog>.

<sup>8</sup> DOJ Records Relating to Solicitor General Noel Francisco's Recusal, AMERICAN OVERSIGHT, <https://www.americanoversight.org/document/doj-civil-division-response-noel-francisco-compliance>; *Francisco & the Travel Ban: What We Learned from the DOJ Documents*, AMERICAN OVERSIGHT, <https://www.americanoversight.org/francisco-the-travel-ban-what-we-learned-from-the-doj-documents>.

<sup>9</sup> See generally *Audit the Wall*, AMERICAN OVERSIGHT, <https://www.americanoversight.org/investigation/audit-the-wall>; see, e.g., *Border Wall Investigation Report: No Plans, No Funding, No Timeline, No Wall*, AMERICAN OVERSIGHT, <https://www.americanoversight.org/border-wall-investigation-report-no-plans-no-funding-no-timeline-no-wall>.

<sup>10</sup> *Documents Reveal Ben Carson Jr.'s Attempts to Use His Influence at HUD to Help His Business*, AMERICAN OVERSIGHT, <https://www.americanoversight.org/documents-reveal-ben-carson-jr-s-attempts-to-use-his-influence-at-hud-to-help-his-business>.

<sup>11</sup> *Investigating the Trump Administration's Efforts to Sell Nuclear Technology to Saudi Arabia*, AMERICAN OVERSIGHT, <https://www.americanoversight.org/investigating-the-trump-administrations-efforts-to-sell-nuclear-technology-to-saudi-arabia>.

political opponents and allegations of misconduct by the Department of Justice itself and the Federal Bureau of Investigation.<sup>12</sup>

Accordingly, American Oversight qualifies for a fee waiver.

### **Guidance Regarding the Search & Processing of Requested Records**

In connection with its request for records, American Oversight provides the following guidance regarding the scope of the records sought and the search and processing of records:

- Please search all locations and systems likely to have responsive records, regardless of format, medium, or physical characteristics.
- Our request for records includes any attachments to those records or other materials enclosed with those records when they were previously transmitted. To the extent that an email is responsive to our request, our request includes all prior messages sent or received in that email chain, as well as any attachments to the email.
- Please search all relevant records or systems containing records regarding agency business. Do not exclude records regarding agency business contained in files, email accounts, or devices in the personal custody of your officials, such as personal email accounts or text messages. Records of official business conducted using unofficial systems or stored outside of official files are subject to the Federal Records Act and FOIA.<sup>13</sup> It is not adequate to rely on policies and procedures that require officials to move such information to official systems within a certain period of time; American Oversight has a right to records contained in those files even if material has not yet been moved to official systems or if officials have, by intent or through negligence, failed to meet their obligations.<sup>14</sup>
- Please use all tools available to your agency to conduct a complete and efficient search for potentially responsive records. Agencies are subject to government-wide requirements to manage agency information electronically,<sup>15</sup> and many agencies

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<sup>12</sup> *Sessions' Letter Shows DOJ Acted on Trump's Authoritarian Demand to Investigate Clinton*, AMERICAN OVERSIGHT, <https://www.americanoversight.org/sessions-letter>.

<sup>13</sup> See *Competitive Enter. Inst. v. Office of Sci. & Tech. Policy*, 827 F.3d 145, 149–50 (D.C. Cir. 2016); cf. *Judicial Watch, Inc. v. Kerry*, 844 F.3d 952, 955–56 (D.C. Cir. 2016).

<sup>14</sup> See *Competitive Enter. Inst. v. Office of Sci. & Tech. Policy*, No. 14-cv-765, slip op. at 8 (D.D.C. Dec. 12, 2016).

<sup>15</sup> Presidential Memorandum—Managing Government Records, 76 Fed. Reg. 75,423 (Nov. 28, 2011), <https://obamawhitehouse.archives.gov/the-press-office/2011/11/28/presidential-memorandum-managing-government-records>; Office of Mgmt. & Budget, Exec. Office of the President, Memorandum for the Heads of Executive

have adopted the National Archives and Records Administration (NARA) Capstone program, or similar policies. These systems provide options for searching emails and other electronic records in a manner that is reasonably likely to be more complete than just searching individual custodian files. For example, a custodian may have deleted a responsive email from his or her email program, but your agency's archiving tools may capture that email under Capstone. At the same time, custodian searches are still necessary; agencies may not have direct access to files stored in .PST files, outside of network drives, in paper format, or in personal email accounts.

- In the event some portions of the requested records are properly exempt from disclosure, please disclose any reasonably segregable non-exempt portions of the requested records. If a request is denied in whole, please state specifically why it is not reasonable to segregate portions of the record for release.
- Please take appropriate steps to ensure that records responsive to this request are not deleted by the agency before the completion of processing for this request. If records potentially responsive to this request are likely to be located on systems where they are subject to potential deletion, including on a scheduled basis, please take steps to prevent that deletion, including, as appropriate, by instituting a litigation hold on those records.

### **Conclusion**

If you have any questions regarding how to construe this request for records or believe that further discussions regarding search and processing would facilitate a more efficient production of records of interest to American Oversight, please do not hesitate to contact American Oversight to discuss this request. American Oversight welcomes an opportunity to discuss its request with you before you undertake your search or incur search or duplication costs. By working together at the outset, American Oversight and your agency can decrease the likelihood of costly and time-consuming litigation in the future.

Where possible, please provide responsive material in an electronic format by email. Alternatively, please provide responsive material in native format or in PDF format on a USB drive. Please send any responsive material being sent by mail to American Oversight, 1030 15th Street NW, Suite B255, Washington, DC 20005. If it will accelerate release of responsive records to American Oversight, please also provide responsive material on a rolling basis.

We share a common mission to promote transparency in government. American Oversight looks forward to working with your agency on this request. If you do not understand any part of this request, please contact Khahilia Shaw at [foia@americanoversight.org](mailto:foia@americanoversight.org) or

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Departments & Independent Agencies, "Managing Government Records Directive," M-12-18 (Aug. 24, 2012), <https://www.archives.gov/files/records-mgmt/m-12-18.pdf>.

202.539.6507. Also, if American Oversight's request for a fee waiver is not granted in full, please contact us immediately upon making such a determination.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in blue ink, appearing to read "Austin R. Evers", with a long horizontal flourish extending to the left.

Austin R. Evers  
Executive Director  
American Oversight