



March 10, 2026

The Honorable Howard Lutnick
Secretary of Commerce
U.S. Department of Commerce
1401 Constitution Ave. NW
Washington, D.C. 20230

Dear Secretary Lutnick:

Democracy Defenders Fund (DDF) and Public Citizen (PC), respectfully call on you to resign from your position as Secretary of the Department of Commerce effective immediately.

Following the partial release of the Epstein files, it has become clear that your previous assertions that you cut ties with the sexual predator Jeffrey Epstein were inaccurate if not false. Documents in the Epstein files also include a whistleblower tip to the Federal Bureau of Investigation (FBI) raising serious allegations of prior business improprieties, including allegations that you engaged in a Ponzi scheme and money laundering operation through Cantor Fitzgerald. Finally, your conduct in office to date has been marked by several alleged violations of the ethical standards intended to safeguard the impartial and competent administration of the Commerce Department.

These revelations suggest not only serious lapses in judgment on your behalf, but also represent a violation of the fiduciary responsibilities entrusted to you as a public official and the head of one of the most important executive branch departments.¹ The American public deserves leadership that it can trust. Because you can no longer fulfill that role, you must step down.

Your Relationship with Epstein Did Not End Until at Least 2018

In October of last year, you stated on “Pod Force One” that, after touring Jeffrey Epstein’s home in 2005, you “decided that I will never be in the room with that disgusting person

¹ See *United States v. deVegter*, 198 F.3d 1324, 1328 (11th Cir. 1999) (“Public officials inherently owe a fiduciary duty to the public to make governmental decisions in the public's best interest”).

ever again.”² On January 30, 2026, you told The New York Times that you “spent zero time” with Epstein.³ More recently, you testified before a Senate Appropriations Subcommittee that you “did not have any relationship” with Epstein and that you “barely had anything to do with him.”⁴

Those statements are fundamentally inaccurate. You visited Epstein’s island in 2012 to have lunch with him.⁵ Five days after you visited Epstein’s island you and Epstein entered into agreements on behalf of your respective limited liability companies to acquire stakes in AdFin, a now-shuttered advertising technology company.⁶ Communications related to AdFin appear to have continued through 2018.⁷ Epstein also contributed \$50,000 in 2017 to an event honoring you and sponsored by the UJA-Federation of New York.⁸ These communications occurred long after Epstein pled guilty in 2008 to soliciting a minor.

Unfortunately, because of the Department of Justice’s incomplete release of the Epstein files, it is unclear if the government maintains additional evidence of your relationship with Epstein. Worse, it was recently reported that the Department surreptitiously removed (and eventually replaced after public reporting) at least one photo of you on Epstein’s Island.⁹ What has been provided, however, is sufficient to show that your assertions are incompatible with reality, or are, at the very least, a deep mischaracterization of that reality. That lack of candor is deeply unsettling.

Documents Suggest that the FBI Received Information Concerning Serious Financial Improprieties

In April of 2021, the FBI was contacted by a whistleblower who complained that you and your former company, Cantor Fitzgerald, were involved in money laundering.¹⁰ According to the summary of the FBI’s interview, the whistleblower explained that Cantor Fitzgerald had engaged in serious fraud and that you “ran everything” and “instructed all of the fraud being

² Josh Christenson, *Howard Lutnick tells ‘Pod Force One’ ex-neighbor Jeffrey Epstein showed off massage room, made creepy comment during townhouse tour*, NEW YORK POST (Oct. 1, 2025), <https://nypost.com/2025/10/01/us-news/howard-lutnick-calls-ex-neighbor-jeffrey-epstein-greatest-blackmailer-ever/>.

³ Mike Baker & Michael Rothfeld, *Commerce Secretary Howard Lutnick Planned Trip to Epstein’s Island*, THE NEW YORK TIMES (Jan. 30, 2026), <https://www.nytimes.com/2026/01/30/us/howard-lutnick-epstein-island.html>.

⁴ Stephen Groves, *Commerce Secretary Howard Lutnick acknowledges meetings with Epstein that contradict previous claims*, AP NEWS (Feb. 10, 2026), <https://apnews.com/article/jeffrey-epstein-files-howard-lutnick-2ead9f281ba2491e0581aced50a0533d>.

⁵ Chris Isidore, et al., *Lutnick confirms an island lunch with Epstein while insisting they ‘did not have any relationship’*, CNN (Feb. 10, 2026), <https://www.cnn.com/2026/02/10/business/howard-lutnick-jeffrey-epstein-island>.

⁶ Epstein Files Transparency Act Responsive Document, <EFTA00289560.pdf>.

⁷ Daniel Ruetenik & Graham Kates, *Lutnick and Epstein were in business together; Epstein files show*, CBS NEWS (Feb. 7, 2026), <https://www.cbsnews.com/news/howard-lutnick-jeffrey-epstein-in-business-together/>; Epstein Files Transparency Act Responsive Document, <EFTA01050747>.

⁸ Epstein Files Transparency Act Responsive Document, <EFTA02229720>.

⁹ Daniel Tuetenik, et al., *Photo of Lutnick on Epstein’s island removed from Justice Department files now restored*, CBS NEWS (Feb. 27, 2026), <https://www.cbsnews.com/news/photo-of-howard-lutnick-on-epsteins-island-was-removed-from-justice-department-files/>.

¹⁰ Epstein Files Transparency Act Responsive Document, <EFTA01249210>.

committed.”¹¹ The complainant also explained that you “used philanthropy as a smokescreen for illegal activity.”¹² The FBI’s search of its internal databases turned up over two dozen hits, including suspicious activity alerts and two cases dealing with investigations into money laundering and RICO violations.¹³ These whistleblower allegations raise serious questions about your past business activities, even though, apparently, the FBI did not open an investigation into you.¹⁴

These newly publicized allegations do not stand alone, however. During your time as CEO of Cantor Fitzgerald, the company and its affiliates were alleged to have engaged in several business improprieties, resulting in multi-million-dollar fines and settlements. For example, in 2016 a Cantor Fitzgerald affiliate, CG Technology, LP, entered into a non-prosecution agreement for an illegal gambling and money laundering scheme.¹⁵ In 2015, you signed a settlement order on behalf of Cantor Fitzgerald with the State of Nevada Gaming Commission to resolve allegations that Cantor had violated Nevada gaming laws.¹⁶ CG Technologies entered into a second settlement with the Nevada Gaming Commission to resolve allegations of gaming law violations just three years later in 2018.¹⁷ Again, in 2015, Cantor Fitzgerald was required to pay \$7.3 million in sanctions to the Financial Industry Regulatory Authority (FINRA) for the sale of billions of shares in unregistered stocks.¹⁸

Questions about your potential role in alleged money laundering and in illegal activity while at Cantor Fitzgerald would themselves normally be disqualifying for high office. When combined with the new allegations related to your conduct with Jeffrey Epstein, the cumulative effect is simply too much to ignore, raising profound questions about your commitment to the rule of law, and ability to carry out the duties of your office.

¹¹ Epstein Files Transparency Act Responsive Document, [EFTA01249207](#).

¹² *Id.*

¹³ Epstein Files Transparency Act Responsive Document, [EFTA01249210](#).

¹⁴ Epstein Files Transparency Act Responsive Document, [EFTA00173881](#).

¹⁵ Press Release, U.S. Department of Justice, Eastern District of New York, *Cantor Fitzgerald Affiliate To Pay More Than \$16 Million In Penalties And Forfeiture For Engaging In Illegal Gambling And Money Laundering Schemes* (2016), <https://www.justice.gov/usao-edny/pr/cantor-fitzgerald-affiliate-pay-more-16-million-penalties-and-forfeiture-engaging>.

¹⁶ Stipulation for Settlement and Order, State Gaming Control Board v. Cantor G&W (Nevada) Holdings, LLC, NGC 12-05 (Jan. 13, 2014), <https://www.gaming.nv.gov/siteassets/content/gaming/complaints/NGC-12-05-Stipulation.pdf>.

¹⁷ Matt Rybaltowski, *CG Technology Fined by Nevada Regulator, Ordered to Scrap Sports Betting Technology*, FORBES (Aug. 15, 2028), <https://www.forbes.com/sites/mattrybaltowski/2018/08/15/cg-technology-fined-by-nevada-regulator-ordered-to-scrap-sports-betting-technology/>.

¹⁸ Suzanne Barlyn, *Cantor Fitzgerald to pay U.S. watchdog \$7.3 million for microcap sales*, REUTERS (Dec. 21, 2015), <https://www.reuters.com/article/world/cantor-fitzgerald-to-pay-us-watchdog-73-million-for-microcap-sales-idUSKBN0U41S8/>. According to the settlement, Cantor neither admitted nor denied FINRA's allegations. *Id.*

You Have Not Complied with Your Ethical Obligations as a Federal Officer

As the head of a Cabinet-level agency, you are responsible for “fostering an ethical culture” at the Department of Commerce.¹⁹ Instead, several actions you have taken have raised serious questions about your own personal commitment to the ethics laws.

In March of last year, Campaign Legal Center filed a complaint with the U.S. Office of Government Ethics seeking an investigation into your use of public office to encourage viewers of Fox news to purchase Tesla stock.²⁰ As you should be aware, because you were required to attend a personal ethics briefing within 15 days of entering government service,²¹ abuse of your office to promote any outside product or enterprise is strictly prohibited.²²

In August last year, Citizens for Responsibility and Ethics in Washington (CREW) filed a complaint with the Office of Special Counsel raising serious concerns about your use of office in an attempt to affect the New York City Mayoral race.²³ As described in that complaint, you told Larry Kudlow on Fox Business News that “the people in New York had better get off their butts and get out there and vote and make sure this communist [Zohran Mamdani] doesn’t run New York City.”²⁴

In December of last year, twenty-five members of Congress requested that the Acting Inspector General of the Department of Commerce investigate your involvement in promoting artificial intelligence data centers at the same time your adult children held immense interests in the AI data center industry.²⁵ As the members explained, “we are concerned that Secretary Lutnick’s official actions to boost AI data centers could be influenced by his conflicts of interest and that these actions come at the expense of everyday Americans who are forced to bear the higher energy costs of the data centers that are inflating the Lutnick family’s wealth.”²⁶ The *New York Times* was even more direct when it wrote “never in modern U.S. history has the office intersected so broadly and deeply with the financial interests of the commerce secretary’s own family, according to interviews with ethics lawyers and historians.”²⁷

Each of these allegations on its own would raise serious questions about your commitment to the ethical standards. Taken together, an inescapable pattern emerges that

¹⁹ 5 C.F.R. § 2638.104(b)(2).

²⁰ Letter from Campaign Legal Center to U.S. Office of Government Ethics and U.S. Department of Commerce (Mar. 21, 2025), <https://campaignlegal.org/sites/default/files/2025-03/Lutnick%20Complaint-Final.pdf>.

²¹ 5 C.F.R. § 2638.305.

²² 5 C.F.R. § 2635.702(b)-(c).

²³ Letter from Citizens for Responsibility and Ethics in Washington to the U.S. Office of Special Counsel (Aug. 13, 2025), <https://www.citizensforethics.org/wp-content/uploads/2025/08/Hatch-Act-Complaint-Howard-Lutnick-on-Fox-Business-July-2025-1.pdf>.

²⁴ *Id.*

²⁵ Letter from Twenty-Five Members of Congress to the Acting Inspector General, U.S. Department of Commerce (Dec. 17, 2025), <https://static01.nyt.com/newsgraphics/documenttools/de9f1463a4f88734/e2cfd676-full.pdf>.

²⁶ *Id.*

²⁷ Eric Lipton, et al., *Family Affair: Commerce Secretary's Sons Cash In on A.I. Frenzy*, THE NEW YORK TIMES (Nov. 20, 2025), available at: <https://www.nytimes.com/2025/11/20/us/politics/howard-lutnick-family-ai.html>.

suggests a disregard for the core ethical obligations that form the basis of the social compact between Americans and their government.

Conclusion

Public service is a public trust.²⁸ Your conduct— including mischaracterization of your relationship with sexual predator Jeffrey Epstein, ongoing questions about potential business improprieties, and allegations of unethical conduct—has irreparably eroded that trust and undermined the credibility of the institution you serve. Public trust cannot be restored except through accountability. In the interest of preserving the integrity of the office of Secretary, we therefore respectfully call for your resignation.

Sincerely,

s
Amb. Norman L. Eisen (Ret.)
Executive Chair
Democracy Defenders Fund

s
Robert Weissman,
Co-President
Public Citizen

s
Virginia Canter
Ethics and Anti-Corruption
Chief Counsel and Director
Democracy Defenders Fund

s
Lisa Gilbert
Co-President
Public Citizen

²⁸ 5 C.F.R. § 2635.101(b)(1).