



PARTNERSHIP TO Save Highway Communities

April 2009

Food and Fuel Sales at Rest Areas: A Threat to Virginia Communities, Jobs and Businesses

A Virginia transportation board recently approved a resolution supporting sales of food and fuel at interstate rest areas. The resolution, which would require a change in federal law, was passed amid public concern over rest area closures and the resulting loss of truck parking. This proposal threatens local property tax revenues used to fund schools, police and fire protection, and would further strain Virginia's economy. Ironically, the plan could actually shrink the total number of truck parking spaces in Virginia.

Virginia residents, local business owners, and county governments, already under pressure because of the recession, could face new economic challenges because of a resolution passed by the Commonwealth Transportation Board.

The resolution urges Governor Kaine to work to end a federal law restricting food and fuel sales at rest areas. A change in this law would threaten thousands of Virginia businesses that cater to interstate travelers. Many Virginians purposely choose to build their businesses near an interstate so they can sell food and fuel to highway users.

Commercialized rest stops stifle business development at nearby interstate exits, according to University of Maryland research. Counties in states (such as Virginia) without commercialized rest areas have twice as many businesses at interstate exits than in those counties with commercialized rest areas, according to the 2003 study. Businesses at the exits cannot compete against a commercialized rest area, which operates as a monopoly solely due to its location on a highway median or shoulder.

Unlike commercialized rest areas, businesses at the exits pay millions of dollars in property taxes to fund essential community services. Should the state board's proposal be implemented, local counties could lose essential funding for public schools and police and fire protection. If fewer travelers exit the interstate to eat or refuel, businesses would close and Virginians would lose their jobs.

The board resolution does not even address a major drawback of the rest area closure plan: a loss of truck parking. Roads with commercialized rest areas have half as many total spaces as routes without these facilities. Private businesses in Virginia offer an estimated 7,300 spaces for professional drivers. The board's plan to keep 412 rest area spaces open would threaten thousands of spaces at businesses directly off the highway. This resolution is not a solution to planned rest area closures in Virginia.