

Privatizing state rest areas would hurt consumers, state alike

Before introducing Texas Gov. Rick Perry, a Republican candidate for president, to talk politics Aug. 16 at her family's business, Iowa 80 Truckstop in Walcott, Delia Meier did some politicking of her own. With an audience of national and local news media on hand, she lashed out at the effort by some people to privatize rest areas in the United States. That is, to allow everything from gas stations to restaurants to do business from rest areas — for fees, of course — that would go to the states.

Meier told those present at the Iowa 80 Group's headquarters that she's concerned about the push by several states and a multi-national company to get Congress to overturn the ban against private sales on state and federal rights of way.

Privatization could, after all, be catastrophic to businesses like hers.

Right now there's a law that prohibits privatization. NATSO, a national trade association representing travel plaza and truck stop owners and operators, says when Congress created the Interstate Highway System in 1956, community leaders were afraid truckers and motorists would bypass their cities and towns, hurting local businesses, employment and tax bases.

So Congress prohibited development on interstate rights of way.

Section 111 of Title 23 of the United States Code prohibits interstate rest areas built after Jan. 1, 1960, from offering commercial services such as food and fuel. (Toll roads are exempt.)

NATSO says this ban on the commercialization of rest areas has resulted in "a strongly competitive economic environment, with over 60,000 businesses developing along U.S. interstate highways."

Meier, daughter of Iowa 80 Truckstop founder Bill Moon, noted last week at the Perry campaign appearance that "the law has been in effect for the last 57 years and to change the rules this late in the game, after the private sector has invested millions, is wrong.

"The ban was and is still right," she said, "and it created opportunity and jobs and still does. Washington's whims should not be determining winners and losers. We believe customers should. And hard work and reinvestment should. And employees should."

Meier told me later that privatization of rest areas is an issue she's been trying to educate people about for some 24 years.

Some states are challenging the law, pushing for privatized commercial rest areas that could take the form of truck stops and offer the same products and services.

"It would be devastating to Walcott," Meier says. "It would be devastating to Scott County and also the Davenport schools to lose our commercial tax base.

"This effect would be felt in thousands



Everyday People

by Phil Roberts

of small towns across the country as it takes commercial property off of the tax rolls, not to mention loss of employment and the loss of places to eat and shop and get gas. Many small towns cannot support a restaurant on their own."

Meier also says facilities and service at commercial rest areas often are inferior. She compares Interstate 80 through Illinois with Interstate 88, a toll road that runs from the Quad Cities to Chicago.

The only place to stop on I-88 is the privately owned oasis at DeKalb, and Meier contends it is under-built and under-maintained.

"There aren't enough bathrooms, and the parking and driveways have so many potholes you are carsick by the time you park," she says. And she says half of the oasis is empty.

In addition, Meier contends, "A few years ago when they wanted to remodel it, they just closed the whole center for over a year instead of staying open and operating around the construction. Then, when they reopened, they didn't bother redoing the drives or expanding capacity. The prices are higher also. If they were not a monopoly, that place would never survive."

She says I-80, on the other hand, is a lot different.

"There is a place to stop at nearly every exit," says Meier. "There are probably 50 small towns benefiting from the traffic."

She says that's proof that the free market system works.

One company — at one time it was Host Marriott, Meier says — operates all of the commercialized rest areas on the Pennsylvania Turnpike and Indiana Toll Road. That, she says, has eliminated startups and small businesses from entering the market.

"The traffic on the interstate is our pie," Meier asserts. "Adding commercialized rest areas doesn't attract new customers because there isn't any other way to get there; it can only take away from businesses on the exits. They also bleed off car traffic, which we desperately need to pay the bills."

If you're like me, and this is the first you've heard of this commercialization controversy, this might also surprise you: The Iowa DOT has a highway funding initiative called Transportation Investment Moves the Economy in the 21st Century, or Time 21 for short.

And Meier says a proposal to commercialize rest areas is part of it, "So you will see that this issue is very much alive in Iowa. Their position is that it makes a cost center into a profit center."

But Meier says, "If you back up and look at the big picture, it will come at a very high cost to rural Iowa and the state overall will be a loser, even though the DOT budget might look a little better."

Perhaps if the present system isn't broken, we shouldn't fix it.



Delia Moon