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## **NO REST AREAS FOR THE WEARY: AAA ASKS VIRGINIA TO RECONSIDER DECISION TO SHUTTER REST AREAS**

*Safety Is A Major Issue Because One-fourth Of Drivers Have Fallen Asleep At The Wheel*

**WASHINGTON, D. C. (Wednesday, July 15, 2009)** – The budget ax will fall on rest areas across the across the Commonwealth of Virginia starting next week. And AAA Mid-Atlantic today joined a key member of Virginia's Congressional Delegation in calling on Virginia Governor Timothy Kaine to rethink a decision to board up 19 rest areas.

AAA, the largest highway safety and leisure travel organization in the nation, cited its growing concerns over the safety of thousands of motorists if the plan is implemented. Rep. Frank Wolf (R-10<sup>th</sup>) recently penned a letter to Governor Kaine asking the Commonwealth to reconsider the decision and keep the rest stops open.

"A growing number of motorists have expressed alarm about the decision to close the rest areas and to cordon off their entrances," said John B. Townsend II, AAA Mid-Atlantic's Manager of Public and Government Affairs.

"This decision could compromise the safety of all motorists and dim Virginia's image as a welcoming tourist destination."

The auto club is concerned about the impact of the decision on the safety of motorists and truckers and the growing problem of drowsy driving on Virginia highways. In fact, motorists often cite drowsy drivers as one of their top safety concerns.

Research shows that 95 percent of the driving population considers drowsy driving by other people to be a threat to their safety. That's according to A NHTSA-sponsored Gallup survey in 2002.

What is more, about 37 percent of respondents reported they had fallen asleep while driving at least once in their life, and 10 percent of those, or an estimated 7.5 million drivers, had done so within the month preceding the survey.

For twenty years Virginia transportation advocates have been shouting from the mountain tops that the pool of transportation money in Virginia would run dry if nothing was done to protect it and infuse it with new funding streams. One week from today the well begins to run dry as 19 rest areas in Virginia will be boarded up.

"Are we really to the point where we must choose between leaving a bridge in an unsafe state and closing rest areas? The Virginia Department of Transportation says we are, and we know they are facing major funding challenges; however, AAA calls on them to get their very powerful magnifying glass out one more time to ensure that they have exhausted every viable option and that their decision is transparent and defensible," Townsend commented.

"It would be tragic to compromise the safety of motorists and desperately needed tourism revenue if there was any other reasonable option."

AAA Mid-Atlantic, which has long been an advocate for motorists, today said there is no question that the safety of motorists will be negatively impacted by the closing of rest areas in Virginia.

"Human nature dictates the need for motorists to stop during a long car trip, but the human who wants to get to his/her destination is likely to try to make it without stopping if the options are limited or a hassle," said Townsend.

One recent trend on our nation's highways is the act of urinating in a bottle while driving. "Talk about distracted and dangerous driving, I would not want to share the road with an overtired driver who is trying to relieve themselves in a bottle while driving 65 miles per hour," added Townsend.

The problem goes well beyond the need to use restroom facilities. Long haul drivers need to stop to rest, drink caffeine, change drivers, etc. If they do not have a convenient option they may drive when they are too tired to do so. Nearly one-third of drivers (28%) say that they have nodded off or fallen asleep while driving a vehicle, according to extensive research by the AAA Foundation for Traffic Safety.

It is estimated that 100,000 police-reported crashes are the direct result of driver fatigue each year, resulting in an estimated 1,500 deaths, 71,000 injuries, and \$12.5 billion in monetary losses, as reported by the National Highway Traffic Safety Administration (NHTSA).

In fact, NHTSA reports that twenty percent of crashes and twelve percent of near-crashes were caused by drowsy drivers.

“What about the 70 million people who travel with pets each year?” Townsend wondered.

“The fast food restaurant and gas station parking lots may now become unpleasant for all visitors as pet owners have no other option than to let Rover relieve himself in the sometimes very small grassy areas or on ornamental plants.”

“It will be a sad day in Virginia next Tuesday as some of Virginia’s welcome mats of southern hospitality will unfortunately be rolled up and put in storage,” Townsend stated. “It will be a day when motorists who should stop for a break before continuing on safely may not stop.”

“Perhaps next Tuesday lawmakers who will return to Richmond in January will begin thinking of a way to break the current deadlock preventing a solution to the problem,” the AAA Mid-Atlantic spokesman observed. “Perhaps one day VDOT can once again boast of having one of the model transportation systems in the country. That is not a claim that can be made in 2009.”

AAA Mid-Atlantic advocates on behalf of its nearly four million members in the District of Columbia, Maryland, Virginia, Delaware, Pennsylvania, and New Jersey. It provides a wide range of personal insurance, travel, financial and automotive services through its 50-plus retail branches, regional operations centers, and the Internet. For more information, please visit our web site at [www.AAA.com](http://www.AAA.com).

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