



July 16, 2009

The Honorable Frank R. Wolf
Representative, 10th District, Virginia
U.S. House of Representatives
241 Cannon House Building
Washington, D.C. 20515-4136

Dear Congressman Wolf:

First, thank you so much for all of your continuing efforts on behalf of mobility and safety in our region. Your strong stand against closing VDOT's proposed rest area closings is much appreciated and is one more valuable service in this regard that you are performing on behalf of your constituents. At AAA Mid-Atlantic, we too have been greatly concerned about the closings and their detrimental impact on motorist safety as well as state tourism.

Our belief is that with the budget ax slated to fall on rest areas across Virginia as early as next week, the safety and security of hundreds of thousands of motorists who travel the interstate highway system in the Commonwealth will be negatively impacted. That's why this decision is of such great concern to AAA, the largest highway safety and leisure travel organization in the nation and the region.

This issue is already resonating among the motoring public and the trucking industry. In fact, a growing number of motorists have expressed alarm about the decision to close the rest areas and to cordon off their entrances.

In our view, there is no question that the safety of motorists will be negatively impacted by the closing of rest areas in Virginia. 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.

We applaud your decision to call upon Governor Tim Kaine to rethink a decision to board up 19 rest areas. As you rightly noted in your recent letter to Governor Kaine, the closure of the rest stops is a scenario that “sets up a recipe for disaster.”

In our view, 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. It will also be a day when many motorists driving Virginia’s Interstates, who should be stopping for breaks frequently as AAA urges, will be continuing on. They will be driving past the shuttered rest areas, putting not only themselves and their families, but also other motorists at greater risk.

Like you, while we understand the state’s current financial predicament, we also believe the state lacks a “viable plan to pay for Virginia’s transportation needs.” That, after all, is largely why we are in this predicament and is why Virginia’s transportation funding crisis is so much more severe than those of many other states.

Perhaps this scenario will serve as a wake-up call to lawmakers in the Commonwealth. In the wake of the decision to shutter the rest areas, perhaps the lawmakers, when they return to Richmond in January, will treat more urgently the need to break the current legislative deadlock preventing a viable transportation budget solution. That is our hope.

Perhaps one day VDOT can once again boast of having one of the model transportation systems in the country. As you are aware, Congressman Wolf, that is, sadly, not a claim that can be made in 2009. Again, thank you for your advocacy and leadership on this issue.

Sincerely,

Mahlon G. (Lon) Anderson
Director, Public and Government Affairs