



The Domino Effect

If Virginia is allowed to commercialize rest areas, other states will follow

BY REX DAVIS, DAVIS TRAVEL CENTERS

It doesn't take long for cancer to spread. It starts with a single cell that begins to grow out of control. These unhealthy cells in turn invade normal ones, spreading the cancer to other parts of the body.

In many respects, this "abnormality" is playing out all across the United States. Only the cancer I'm referring to is commercialization. And the invading cell is Virginia.

On first glance, this may seem like a dramatic analogy. But it clearly illustrates what will happen if Virginia is allowed to overturn longstanding federal policy and commercialize its rest areas.

Cash-strapped states across America are hunting for viable opportunities to replenish state coffers, emaciated from the economic downturn. To many, Virginia's plan to circumvent the law and add commercial businesses on property adjacent to state rest areas seems like a good solution.

But if left unchecked, Virginia has the potential to radically alter the American business landscape, devastating the truckstop and travel plaza industry nationwide.

If Virginia succeeds, other states undoubtedly will follow suit. And one by one, state-operated monopolies will overrun businesses like ours.

As a proud Virginia resident and a good corporate citizen, I'm troubled that the Virginia Department of Transportation continues to pursue revenue-raising strategies that will cripple its small-business owners.

As an involved NATSO member, I recognize that it's my job to work alongside NATSO to ensure that this ill-conceived idea never makes it past the planning stage.

It's important to recognize that more than Virginia's business climate is at stake. Virginia represents a key battleground in what is a collective fight to save our businesses nationwide.

The Commonwealth's determination to continue this fight ignites my resolve to protect my business and my industry. And now, more than ever, we must come together to ensure a positive outcome that will keep truckstops and travel plazas strong for years to come.

Part of achieving this goal requires giving state representatives and members of Congress a firsthand account of the devastating



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effect such practices would have on our industry.

Recently, I met with Virginia state officials in conjunction with the NATSO government affairs team to educate them about how Davis Travel Centers — and my 150 employees — thrive, thanks in part to the 1960s-era ban on commercializing Interstate rest areas.

Our message was simple: The government recognized that it would be difficult for establishments like mine to compete with government-run businesses that can be both directly seen and accessed from the Interstate right of way.

In Virginia, more than 2,300 exit-based businesses prosper, employing more than 65,000 people and contributing more than \$100 million in local taxes, as a result of this ban.

Nationwide, some 60,000 businesses flourish along the exits, offering employment for more than 2 million Americans.

Virginia's plan to commercialize state rest areas threatens my business — and thousands like it — during very difficult economic times, and puts thousands of jobs in jeopardy. What's more, Virginia's strategy will severely slash the millions in local sales and property taxes these businesses contribute to local communities to fund public schools and local police and fire departments.

The *Washington Times* recently took Virginia to task for one of its other highway-raiding funding plans, tolling the Interstate. The newspaper said taking such action would return America to the days of the Articles of Confederation, when one state could impose duties on another state's commerce without restriction. "As soon as one starts, it's an invitation for all the rest to get in on the action," the editorial read.

The *Washington Times* got it right, and that applies just as strongly to rest area commercialization. Virginia should pull the plug on any transit project unable to fund itself and restore driver fees to their rightful purpose: improving and freeing all of the commonwealth's highroads. ●