



FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE
DATE: June 13, 2017
CONTACT: Tiffany Wlazlowski Neuman
Phone: (703) 739-8578
E-mail: twlazlowski@natso.com

Business and Community Leaders Urge Congress to Oppose Commercial Rest Areas

ALEXANDRIA, VA. — A diverse coalition from restaurants and fuel retailers to city governments, trucking firms and blind entrepreneurs today urged key lawmakers to oppose efforts to commercialize Interstate rest areas as Congress considers infrastructure legislation.

The Administration's recent proposal to allow the sale of food, fuel and other commercial services at Interstate rest areas would drain local businesses of customers, communities of much-needed jobs, and city governments of critical tax revenue by putting established businesses in direct competition with state governments. At the same time, it would give the state an unfair competitive advantage by granting the state direct access to highway motorists, the groups said in letters to Congress.

Further, upending long-established policy prohibiting commercial rest areas threatens the livelihood of the nation's blind merchants, who service the vending machines at rest areas, and would hinder the Department of Transportation's goal of expanding commercial truck parking capacity nationwide.

"Congress effectively privatized highway services in 1960, when Congress prohibited states from offering commercial services at rest areas along the Interstate Highway System specifically so that private sector entities would grow and provide services to the traveling public," said NATSO President and CEO Lisa Mullings. "Established businesses including travel plazas, convenience stores, restaurants and hotels are already meeting the needs of highway travelers.

"If the government gets in the business of selling food and fuel or other commercial services, local communities will suffer as tax revenues shift to the state; hard-working business owners will lose their customer base; blind entrepreneurs will be out of work and truck drivers will have a harder time finding a safe place to rest. Commercializing Interstate rest areas would create far more problems than it will solve," Mullings said.

In many rural communities located near Interstates, gas stations, restaurants, convenience stores, truckstops, and hotels represent the largest local taxpayers, contributing more than \$22.5 billion in state and local taxes. These funds help support schools, police and fire departments and other vital public services.

"By commercializing rest areas, cities and towns stand to lose critical revenue used for funding road maintenance, building schools and keeping communities safe," said Clarence E. Anthony, CEO and executive director of the National League of Cities (NLC). "Such a move would risk flatlining local property tax revenues, especially impacting the hundreds of small cities and rural communities whose economies depend on highway travelers."

Lea Dias, President of the National Council of State Agencies for the Blind, said, "NCSAB is extremely concerned about the implications of rest area commercialization for thousands of small family businesses, including those owned and operated by blind entrepreneurs. Under the Randolph-Sheppard Act, a federal law that supports entrepreneurial opportunities for persons who are blind, permits are awarded to blind vendors to manage vending locations at rest areas along federal interstates. Commercialization of these rest areas would result in significant loss of sales opportunities at highway exits, as well as for rest area vending machines, that would be unable to compete with larger rest area food services.

"This economic disruption to small family businesses, including those owned by entrepreneurs who are blind, and to the communities that they live in, would likely shift economic activity from small businesses to large corporations," Dias said. "It would also shift tax revenue from cities and counties, without necessarily increasing net jobs, sales, or taxes paid. As the agencies that administer the Randolph-Sheppard Act, we urge policymakers to examine carefully the impact on small businesses, including those owned by blind entrepreneurs, of commercialization of rest areas along federal interstates.

"There is already an unacceptably high unemployment rate of approximately 70 percent among blind Americans," said Mark Riccobono, President of the National Federation of the Blind. "Congress should not contribute to the problem by putting the blind entrepreneurs who service rest area vending machines out of work."

Congress reaffirmed its commitment to helping exit-based businesses thrive and to supporting local communities as recently as 2012, when the Senate voted 86 to 12 to uphold the longstanding federal law prohibiting the sale of food, fuel and other convenience items from Interstate rest areas.

Today's letters to Congress were signed by NATSO, Asian American Hotel Owners Association, International Franchise Association, National Association of Convenience Stores, National Automatic Merchandising Association, National Council of Chain Restaurants, National Federation of the Blind, National Franchisee Association, National League of Cities, National Restaurant Association, National Tank Truck Carriers, Petroleum Marketers Association of America, and the Society of Independent Gasoline Marketers of America.

###

NATSO is the professional association of America's travel plaza and truckstop industry. Founded in 1960, NATSO represents the industry on legislative and regulatory matters; serves as the official source of information on the diverse travel plaza and truckstop industry; provides education to its members; conducts an annual convention and trade show; and supports efforts to generally improve the business climate in which its members operate.