



NATIONAL ASSOCIATION OF BLIND MERCHANTS

Preserving Opportunities for Blind Entrepreneurs at Interstate Rest Areas

Say No to Commercialization and Tolling of the Interstate Rest Areas

Today, almost four hundred blind entrepreneurs own businesses that provide vending services to motorists who take safety stops at the rest areas on our nation's interstate highways. This number represents approximately 20 percent¹ of the blind vendors nationwide who participate in the Randolph-Sheppard Program. In 1982, the Kennelly Amendments to the Surface Transportation Act authorized state licensing agencies designated to administer the Randolph-Sheppard Program the priority to operate vending machines at the interstate rest areas. These vending machines are the only commercial activity that is allowed to take place at the rest areas. There have been efforts in the past to allow states to commercialize these rest areas in an effort to generate revenue for the states. These efforts to date have failed because large-scale commercialization is counter to the purpose of the rest areas, which is to promote safety. Likewise, Congress has generally prohibited the tolling of these interstate highways.

The Trump Administration has pledged a \$1 trillion infrastructure package that will presumably rely on public-private partnerships. Congress will likely be asked to reexamine these prohibitions. There will be a temptation to lift these prohibitions in lieu of raising taxes. However, the costs of such actions would be devastating to blind entrepreneurs as well as truck stops, travel plazas, convenience stores, and restaurants located at the interstate exits. Local government entities that rely on taxes from these businesses would suffer, and decreased business would result in reduced taxes collected.

Commercialization would almost immediately displace four hundred blind entrepreneurs who service vending machines at the interstate rest areas. These individuals will lose their livelihoods and many will be forced to rely on government support. This would be devastating to the Randolph-Sheppard Program nationwide. Not only does 20 percent of the nation's vending facility program for the blind go away, but the financial viability of many state programs would be jeopardized.

Tolling will divert traffic away from the interstate highways as motorists look to avoid the payment of tolls. This would have a secondary impact on these businesses owned by blind entrepreneurs. Less traffic on the highways translates to fewer visitors at the rest areas, which means fewer sales from the vending machines. It will also mean increased traffic on secondary roads that are not equipped to handle it, which will create greater safety risks.

Congressman Banks of Indiana has introduced HR 1990 that would allow states to commercialize the interstate rest areas. The National Federation of the Blind and its merchants division, the National Association of Blind Merchants, join with other organizations such as the

National Association of Truck Stop Operators and the National Association of Convenience Stores in opposing this legislation.

Oppose HR 1990 and any other efforts to allow commercialization of interstate rest areas.

For more information, contact:

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¹ United States Department of Education, Rehabilitation Services Administration (2014), *Randolph Sheppard Vending Facility Program*. <https://ed.gov/programs/rsarsp/index.html>