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COLUMN

PennDOT reopens a few highway rest stops shut by coronavirus, after truckers complain to Trump

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PENNDOT



Pennsylvania's Department of Transportation has agreed to reopen 13 locations for truck parking, and add portable toilets, after trucking and factory advocates complained to President Donald Trump that the state's Tuesday shutdown of 48 Interstate highway rest areas and facilities threatened driver safety and deliveries of vital food, medical and industrial supplies.

State workers will take down barricades at rest areas in seven counties on Thursday, two days after they went up, PennDOT spokeswoman Alexis Campbell said. She said there would be five portable toilets at each site, cleaned daily.

Still, "in order to prevent further spread of COVID-19, we will not be opening any of the indoor facilities because there is no staff to keep them clean and properly sanitized," she added.

That matches the new policy at 15 Pennsylvania Turnpike rest areas, where convenience stores and portable toilets remain open but restaurants and indoor restrooms with flush toilets were shut Tuesday as part of a larger shutdown of state offices.



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The sites to be reopened for truckers include locations on I-81, which serves the warehouse districts of central Pennsylvania, at the Luzerne County and Cumberland County rest areas, both north and southbound; I-80 (which crosses northern Pennsylvania and carries New York-to-Chicago traffic) in Venango, Centre, and Montour Counties, east and westbound at each site; and I-79 (Erie to Pittsburgh), in Crawford County both directions, and in Allegheny County northbound only.

But that's not enough, Ken Lavelle, a Philadelphia doctor who works with emergency medical services in Pennsylvania and New Jersey, said in a note he posted on social media. "The virus is shed in stool. Portable bathrooms will increase [the spread of coronavirus] in truckers who are the backbone of our supply train. Interior bathrooms must be re-opened," he wrote.

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PennDOT's partial reversal followed complaints by leaders of the powerful American Trucking Association (ATA) and the Philadelphia Manufacturing Alliance that the closures threatened driver safety and could lead companies to curtail deliveries vital to key services and industries.

“Keep rest stops open,” ATA president Chris Spear wrote in his letter to Trump, which was copied to Transportation Secretary Elaine Chao and Federal Highway Administration and Motor Carrier Safety officials.

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Drivers “must manage fatigue as they respond to this emergency, and rest stops are an irreplaceable component,” he added.

Pennsylvania was the first state to announce it is closing rest areas to trucks, ATA spokesman Sean McNally told me.

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McNally acknowledged the association has not heard that any drivers or truck lines stopped deliveries as a result of the policy. But he said drivers and motor carriers are calling to express concern.

“When you are on the road as a truck driver, you need to stop, to get rest, to use the bathroom, to get a snack, to do all the things you do when you are driving. What they are having to do, potentially, is stop at the side of the road, which is not safe for many reasons,” McNally said.

Shutting down the centers would have “unintended consequences” that could stop factory production and throw thousands out of work, warned Steve Jurash, who runs the Philadelphia Manufacturing Alliance: “Trucking companies will not deliver, which will effectively cut off the supply chain to our manufacturing companies.”

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Jurash said Tuesday night that he was “on my way back to Harrisburg,” where he planned to appeal the decision not to let truckers park or use restrooms.

After PennDOT’s partial turnabout Jurash thanked the Inquirer for spotlighting the threat. “Good work on the PennDOT reversal story,” he told me in an email. “Everyone is breathing a sigh of relief!”

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Finding parking spaces for the big rigs is [one of the drivers’ top five issues](#),” affirmed Jim Blaze, a Philadelphia-based railroad economist. He said the state needs to better consider the effects of its emergency decrees.

Besides restrooms, the rest stops often provide food vending machines, along with a relatively secure place for drivers to sleep in their cabins on long runs.

A lack of rest areas leaves drivers with unpleasant alternatives: parking along highways (and relieving themselves in the nearby woods), driving many miles farther to reach crowded commercial truck stops, and parking outside plants and warehouses in unsecured locations.

“If America wants its Purell, toilet paper, food and alcohol delivered, our drivers need to have a place to stay, use the restroom facilities and park when they run out of driving hours,” Morgan Stanley analyst Ravi Shankar wrote in a report reacting to the shutdown, cited in an article by trucking newsletter FreightWaves, by reporter John Kingston, who added that Pennsylvania’s move in shutting its rest areas to trucks was, so far, unique.