



THE THOMAS JEFFERSON
INSTITUTE FOR PUBLIC POLICY

Thomas Jefferson

Campaign Briefing Series 2003

**Forcing Drivers Off the Road
Won't Solve Virginia's Traffic Woes**

By: Alan Pisarski
Transportation Consultant

September 2003

Thomas Jefferson Institute for Public Policy

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Thomas Jefferson Institute for Public Policy
9035 Golden Sunset Lane
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703/440-9447
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Foreword

Transportation is one of the complicated issues that always seems to be one of those “only if we had the money” kind of discussions.

But handling transportation in a creative and effective manner is one of the most important goals that our elected officials face. It is not easy. It is expensive no matter how it is done. And our economy’s long-term health requires a sensible and workable transportation network that gets people to and from work and to and from their various non-work errands and required destinations.

Alan Pisarski is, in my opinion, one of the most sensible and down-to-earth transportation experts in the country. He is wise and he approaches this critical issue in a methodical and sensible manner.

Over two years ago, Pisarski wrote an insightful article for the Weldon Cooper Center for Public Policy and it was published in its newsletter, The Virginia News Letter. That piece is still most relevant today and it is for that reason that we are re-publishing it with permission as part of our Campaign 2003 Briefing Series.

Clearly, the transportation “crisis” in Northern Virginia and Hampton Roads is dramatically different from the transportation “headaches” experienced in Richmond and in less crowded areas of the state. Yet, the state’s economy is focused in the “Golden Triangle” from Northern Virginia, to Richmond and over to Hampton Roads. At the same time, transportation improvement is key to the rest of the state as well.

Major tax increases were defeated last fall in Northern Virginia and in Hampton Roads, the two areas facing true “gridlock” in the movement of cars. But the voters weren’t convinced that increased taxes would be spent in a way that would improve the situation. That is why new approaches are needed and why this article by Alan Pisarski makes good sense.

The opinions of Alan Pisarski in this piece are his and do not necessarily reflect those of the Thomas Jefferson Institute or its Board of Directors. Nothing in this paper is meant to influence pending legislation.

Michael W. Thompson
Chairman and President
Thomas Jefferson Institute for Public Policy
September 2003

Forcing Drivers Off the Road Won't Solve Virginia's Traffic Woes

Executive Summary

Nearly every region of Virginia faces major transportation problems. But few would dispute that Northern Virginia has the most acute needs.

Causes:

- Income levels: Higher income families make about 40 percent more auto-oriented trips.
- Population: Increases in raw numbers, workers per household, shift away from downtown orientation to suburb-to-suburb commuting.
- Time: Running errands on the way to and from work to save time (kids, food, cleaning) – a pattern making mass transit use and car-pooling nearly impossible.
- Policy objectives of making road transportation worse to drive people to mass transit.

Solutions:

- Maintain investment in current Metro system.
- Encourage transit-like activity responding to dispersed nature of modern travel problems (i.e., taxi/van/jitney-like private operations).
- Make short-term improvements to improve congestion –
 - Better incident management
 - Improved timing of signals
 - Use of reversible lanes and shoulder lanes
 - High Occupancy Toll (HOT) lanes
 - Expanding access to transit facilities and opening transit to competitive outsourcing.
- Efforts to build new transit lines that require density of traffic where there is none will be delusional and self-defeating.
- Long term: Recognize there is more to transportation than commuting. In many areas, Saturday morning is most difficult time to travel. Non-commute travel is growing faster than commuting. Consider –
 - Build transit where it really matters and support it with proper access (rezoning, parking, bike facilities, sidewalks).
 - Extend transit option to private sector to provide jitney-like transit services, encourage firms to use vans for employees, use small-scale entrepreneurship and investments to achieve effective services in low-density areas.
 - Move to “around the clock” construction to speed road building.
 - Accept higher initial costs in building roads, but longer lower-cost life times to maintain roads longer and without road-blocking repairs.
 - Utilize private sector to build faster and cheaper, where appropriate.
 - Create more rigorous decision-making: better data about needs and trends; better economic justification of needs; better quantification of costs and benefits.

The Virginia NEWS LETTER

Forcing Drivers Off the Road Won't Solve Virginia's Traffic Woes

By Alan E. Pisarski

Transportation is perpetually number 11 on everyone's top 10 list of public things that need doing, except during elections when politicians suddenly feel our pain regarding our travel woes. It is wondrous how willing politicians are to take credit for jobs created but fail to recognize that each job pretty much generates a commuter twice a day.

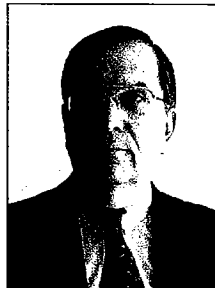
Realistically, transportation probably belongs at number 6 or 7 on our list of local public issues, after education, crime, health care, etc. When transportation reaches No. 1 on the public issues hit parade then it's either because everything else is in wonderful shape or we have let transportation get really bad.

Transportation infrastructure, particularly highway capacity, doesn't overload over night;

it takes some years of sustained disinterest to create a situation such as we face today.

The process of deciding and doing anything about transportation investment is so slow and so subject to being knocked off the track by anyone with obstruction in mind that any significant level of growth over the years can easily outgrow the infrastructure in a relatively short time. If we could all agree on a transportation project today, it would be 10 years before we saw anything on the ground to ease our problems.

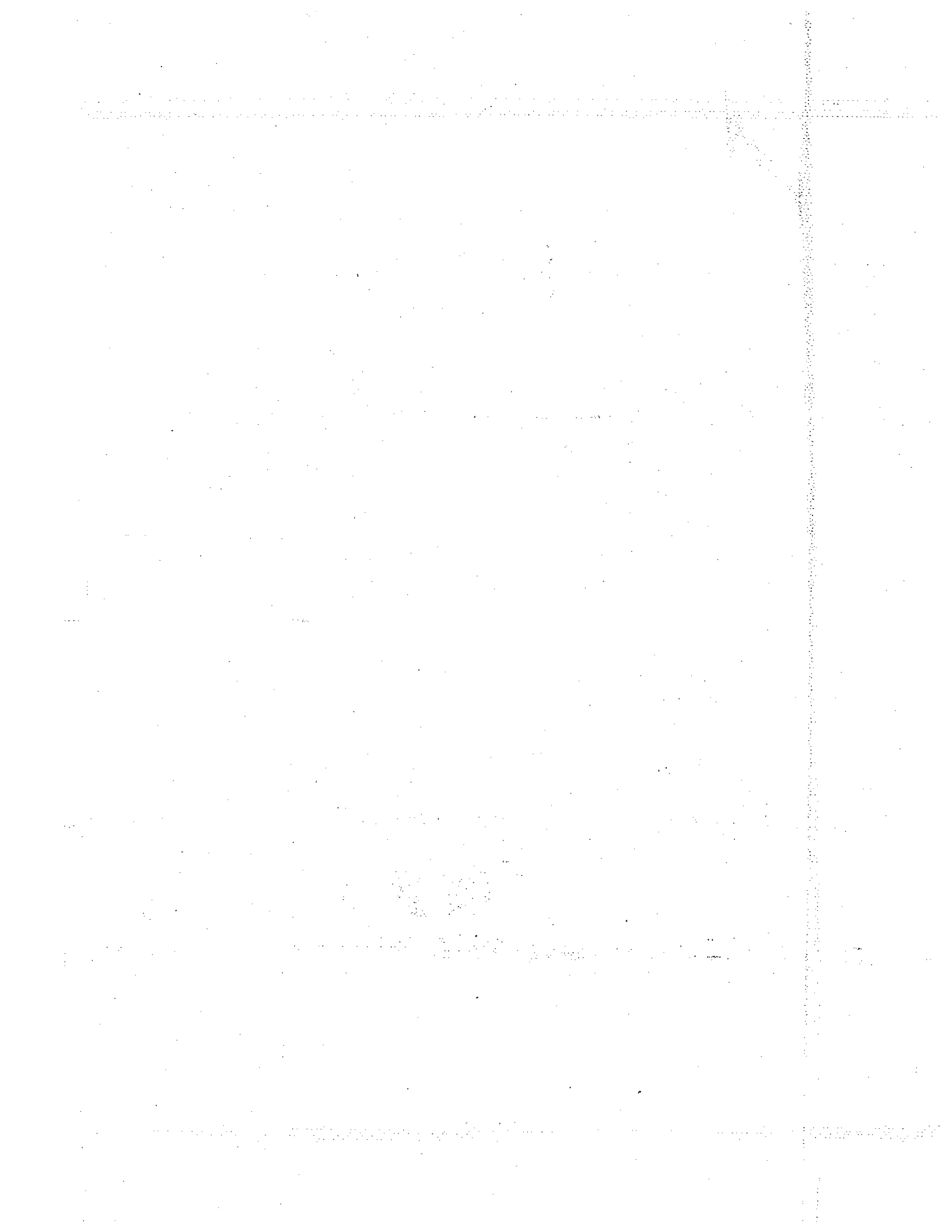
Nearly every region of Virginia faces major transportation problems. But few would dispute that Northern Virginia has the most acute needs. Dealing with these needs is the subject of this *News Letter*.



Alan E. Pisarski



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last a moment if we had to spend our own money on them. Proposed light rail lines are sprinkled about like flower petals with no more rationale than that they are "in" now. None can reach the stage of responding to one year's growth in highway travel. They are not even on the same page in terms of scale.

In Northern Virginia we see areas where transit is about two percent of the passenger travel activity, and zero, of course, of the freight, and gets about 50 percent of the public funding often in high-cost schemes subsidizing the high-income population and transit employees. Are there transit options that could help? Maybe! But again the present process will probably not permit them to happen.

The First Order of Business

The first order of business in Northern Virginia must be maintaining what we've got in the Metro transit system; funding for this must be the highest transit priority. Beyond that, for mass transit to make a difference it would have to heavily saturate an area so that accessibility is seriously affected by transit presence. Think of what would have happened if we had invested all of the Metro dollars within the city center or the core. It is just possible that such a system might, *might*, have made a real difference, where people wouldn't need a car—or a second car. Or one could conceive of the opposite, a regional commuter rail-like system that reached distant centers like Harper's Ferry, Annapolis, Frederick and Fredericksburg and created major high access nodes of development.

As it is, the system must balance investment and service with the political membership of the region, making sure that everyone gets something, so that it is as much a source of the sprawl as anything else that might be condemned for that sin.

The future belongs to a transit-like activity that responds to the dispersed nature of today's travel patterns, one not likely to be easily provided by a public agency more oriented to the mass in mass transit, but amenable to taxi/van/jitney-like private operations.

What Happens if We Do Nothing?

It is belaboring the obvious to say that more traffic will generate more congestion and overall slower speeds. The obvious side effects of that are, wasted time, wasted fuel, and greater pollution.

One factor that is rarely addressed in such cases is the decline in reliability of the system. In some cases reliability is a more crucial concern than speed, especially in a freight movement context. One of the penalties of loss of reliability is the wasted time resulting from the need to factor in the potential for delays, when, for example, someone arrives at a meeting 20 minutes early because they cannot trust the system to deliver them "just-in-time." One reliability effect of the system is that environmental concerns have permitted/forced us to expand existing facilities rather than creating new parallel ones at reasonable spacing. This creates the big eyesores of 10 and 12 lane freeways, but also reduces reliability when one overturned truck can paralyze the entire area.

The longer term indirect effects are greater costs of just about everything we consume as transportation costs rise as a share of the price of goods. Consumers, employers, and shopkeepers are affected by the decline in effective market-size as the market area in a 20-minute orbit around their home, office or store shrinks. This is expressed in the form of fewer choices, higher prices and lower productivity. Eventually the region's economic competitiveness suffers and growth slows. Some citizens might be happy to see growth go somewhere else, but the declines also manifest themselves in lost competitiveness in a global economy, lower wages, and fewer job opportunities for our kids.

An inescapable outcome of declining levels of service in the system is a continued centrifugal force sending growth to the periphery of the region, where there is always some capacity. As we squeeze consumers and commuters in the hope that they will do what "we want," they will do what they want, which will be move away to the edge.

What Needs to be Done—Short Term and Long Term?

Short term or long term we must recognize the failure and wrong-headedness of a public policy that is trying to force people from their cars. We have to treat the public like adults who are capable of making rational decisions about meeting their own social and economic needs rather than recalcitrant adolescents who are to be treated more like patients than customers.

We should have mass transit compete in terms of quality, making it and all the other alternatives to the auto better, rather than trying to make travel by auto worse. Perhaps the greatest

role for transit will be serving the auto-less, mainstreaming the poverty-level populations and getting central city workers to suburban jobs.

We need to reform the planning processes. A better environment must be a major goal of the process, not used as an obstacle to obstruct any progress whatsoever, but a real goal to be accomplished along with the goal of sustained mobility. We must recognize that the greatest environmental concern of transportation is called safety, and focus investments accordingly. Our citizens want it all: a cleaner environment and a safer, more effective transportation system. The starting point for success here will be in the recognition of the reality that most environmental progress in transportation will come from technical improvements in vehicles, fuels, and operations rather than in "reforming" the behavior of our wayward citizens.

Short Term Options

The effective short-term options are few; most are being tried someplace. Almost by definition these tend to be low-cost and within the purview of the existing authorities of operating agencies. They can make an immense contribution.

- Better incident management
- Better timing of signals
- More traffic information about problems
- Use of reversible lanes
- Use of shoulder lanes
- High Occupancy - Toll (HOT) lanes
- Road network fill-ins
- Expanding access to transit facilities
- Establishing truly experimental transit programs
- Opening transit to private players
- Further development of work-at-home and tele-commuting

Long Term Needs

First, a positive spirit is needed: There has been a tendency to emphasize despair over the situation. We need a spirit that recognizes that there are actions we can take to make things better for everyone. Can we abolish congestion? No, but we can improve everyone's situation and expand options, despite those whose agenda it is to convince us that nothing can be done. The group that sells the idea that "it doesn't pay to build a road; it just fills up again," should test that argument on libraries, schools and hospitals, or mass transit.

One real ray of sunshine is that much of the explosion in demand that came out of the

aging of the baby boom and the arrival of women in tremendous numbers in the work force is behind us. We will have growth in the future but it will be more moderate and more operable. We are a wealthy society and can afford these challenges. Our failures to keep up with colossal levels of growth in the past should not discourage us from dealing with the future.

In the Washington area, there are two very successful models of what can be done: the Metro Transit Authority and the Metro Airports Authority. Both have a mission to build first class systems to serve the region and have met the challenge well. We may need to consider a parallel authority structure for roads. Certainly the strengths of the private sector must be employed to save time and money.

We must recognize that there is more to transportation than commuting. In many parts of Northern Virginia, Saturday morning is the most difficult time to travel. Non-commute travel is growing faster than commuting.

Throwing vast sums at transit won't do it. We need all the funding we can get to upgrade a declining Metro system. That is our No. 1 priority. But schemes to extend the system into the hinterland and to build new transit lines that require density of traffic where there is none will be delusional and self-defeating. Our resources are too limited not to subject projects that carry long-term operating subsidies with them to very strict tests of financial viability. Let's build transit where it can be demonstrated that it will really matter and then support it with proper access in the form of rezoning, parking, bike facilities and sidewalks. At the same time we must extend the option to the private sector to provide jitney-like transit services, encourage firms to use vans for their employees and use small-scale entrepreneurship and investments to achieve effective services in low-density conditions.

We need to address the awesome and awful amounts of time and money it takes to build just about anything these days. Around the clock construction is one way the public can buy faster response; some states are experimenting with European methods accepting higher initial costs but longer lower-cost life times; some are using the private sector to build faster and cheaper in some cases; all of these need to be considered.

We need to focus on creating some rigor in our decision-making processes: better data about needs and trends; better economic justification of our needs; better quantification of costs and benefits.

We need to recognize that after all the efficiencies in construction and maintenance are

gleaned we still will have to pay more for a first-class transportation system. An investment in the transportation system enables us to make our immense investments in our vehicles effective. The costs of a first-class system are far less than the lost costs every year in wasted fuel, time and lost opportunities. An effective system will pay for itself in saved lives, saved time, saved tempers, increased social and economic opportunity and an improved environment.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Mr. Pisarski has been involved in transportation policy for three decades as a writer and consultant, and in various positions with the U.S. Department of Transportation. He currently serves as chairman of the Committee on National Transportation Statistics of the U.S. Academy of Science's Transportation Research Board. He is perhaps best known for his studies on American commuting patterns. He lives in Falls Church. ●

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JANUARY/FEBRUARY 2000

Editor: William H. Wood
Graphic Design: Susan Wormington

The Virginia News Letter (ISSN 0042-0271) is published ten times a year by the Weldon Cooper Center for Public Service, University of Virginia, P.O. Box 400206, Charlottesville, Virginia 22904-4206; (804)982-5704, TDD: (804) 982-HEAR.

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Periodical postage paid at Charlottesville, Virginia.

Postmaster: Send address changes to the Weldon Cooper Center for Public Service, P.O. Box 400206, Charlottesville, Virginia 22904-4206.

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“... a wise and frugal government, which shall restrain men from injuring one another, shall leave them otherwise free to regulate their own pursuits of industry and improvement, and shall not take from the mouth of labor the bread it has earned. This is the sum of good government, and this is necessary to close the circle of our felicities.”

Thomas Jefferson

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Thomas Jefferson Institute for Public Policy
9035 Golden Sunset Lane
Springfield, Virginia 22153
703.440.9447
info@thomasjeffersoninst.org
www.thomasjeffersoninst.org