

**REPORT OF THE
DEPARTMENT OF TRANSPORTATION ON**

**WELCOME CENTERS AND
REST AREAS**

**TO THE GOVERNOR AND
THE GENERAL ASSEMBLY OF VIRGINIA**



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**A DETERMINATION OF PROPOSED NEW SITES AND UPGRADES FOR
WELCOME CENTERS AIMED AT PROMOTING TOURISM IN
SOUTHWEST VIRGINIA**

PREFACE

Senate Joint Resolution 179 (SJR 179) directed the Virginia Department of Transportation (VDOT) to work toward determining new sites for welcome centers and upgrading, enhancing, renovating, and expanding existing welcome centers and rest areas in order to promote and entice tourism *and* to study the feasibility of locating additional welcome centers at major entrances to Southwest Virginia from neighboring states, and increasing staffing at existing centers. VDOT's Maintenance Division was designated as the lead division for the study and was responsible for the preparation of this report. A task force composed of VDOT and Virginia Division of Tourism (VDT) staff was assembled to assist in the preparation.

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Senate Joint Resolution 179 (SJR 179) directed the Virginia Department of Transportation (VDOT) to work toward determining new sites for welcome centers and upgrading, enhancing, renovating, and expanding existing welcome centers and rest areas in order to promote and entice tourism *and* to study the feasibility of locating additional welcome centers at major entrances to Southwest Virginia from neighboring states, and increasing staffing at existing centers. A task force composed of VDOT and Virginia Division of Tourism (VDT) staff was assembled to address this Resolution.

The task group identified four major issues that SJR 179 directed VDOT to scrutinize:

1. determine new welcome center sites in the Commonwealth
2. specifically examine the feasibility of establishing new welcome centers in Southwest Virginia
3. explore opportunities for enhancing, upgrading, and expanding Virginia's existing welcome centers and rest areas
4. examine the feasibility of increasing staffing at existing welcome centers in Southwest Virginia.

Discussion with the patrons of SJR 179 revealed that the principal purpose of the resolution was to determine if additional welcome centers could be established in Southwest Virginia as a means of promoting and enticing tourism there, thus benefiting the overall economy of the region. A secondary purpose was to determine if upgrading existing centers or adding new ones might enhance tourist's impressions of the Commonwealth and influence them to take advantage of more tourism opportunities in Virginia.

To address the question of whether locating additional welcome centers in Southwest Virginia could promote tourism in that region, the task group identified five roads leading into Southwest Virginia from other states on which new welcome centers might be constructed. It was assumed that these centers would be configured similar to those located on Virginia's interstate system. The five sites chosen for analysis were:

Prospective Southwest Virginia Welcome Center Sites

Site No.	Route No.	Jurisdiction	VDOT District	Roadway Type
1	58	Lee County	Bristol	Two-lane primary
2	23	Scott County	Bristol	Four-lane primary
3	23	Wise County	Bristol	Four-lane primary
4	460	Tazewell County	Bristol	Four-lane primary
5	460	Giles County	Salem	Four-lane primary

The feasibility of establishing these welcome centers was analyzed from three perspectives: site availability and suitability, cost, and impact on tourism and visitation in Southwest Virginia. The sites on Routes 23 and 460 would be new locations. The Route 58 site, known as the Karlan property, is owned by the Virginia Department of Conservation and Recreation, where long-range plans call for a state park and the renovation of several existing structures.

With respect to site availability and suitability, this analysis focused on the availability of five acre tracts of usable land within five miles of the state border. Land appears to be available at the Route 23 and 460 locations and there is also sufficient acreage to house a welcome center at the Karlan site on Route 58. In addition, water, sewage, and electrical services appear to be available at all locations. At all but the Karlan site, however, VDOT might be faced with exercising its power of eminent domain, since it is not known whether the owners of these tracts would be willing to sell their land. The Karlan site, purchased by the Commonwealth in 1992, would not require eminent domain considerations.

The cost of developing five new welcome centers would be approximately \$14,559,000, an average of \$2.91 million per site. The Karlan site would cost the least to build (approximately \$1.955 million) since the land is already state-owned and water and sewer facilities are present. Annual costs for maintaining the proposed centers is projected to be \$568,080. Staffing costs, if levels that are typical at Virginia's welcome centers are instituted at the new centers, would be approximately \$391,000 annually. This latter figure assumes four VDT employees per center. Options do exist for paring down the staffing costs such as having local jurisdictions staff the centers, contracting out counselor services to the private sector, establishing partnerships with local businesses, or using volunteers.

There is little debate that welcome centers are a desirable and valuable component of Virginia's interstate system. Studies reveal that the centers provide a break for drivers; offer information about the Commonwealth's many attractions, features, and tourist related businesses; and in fact, promote a positive image of the state and can influence how travelers spend their time (and money) in Virginia. But whether additional welcome centers on local roads in the southwest region of the state would activate additional tourist spending in that region is another question. There is no evidence to show that welcome centers are traveler destinations in and of themselves. Rather, studies show that welcome centers simply facilitate positive influences on traveler behavior rather than cause it. In the Southwest Virginia region, traffic data show that a large percentage of the traffic on the five routes for which additional welcome centers are considered is local. Given these facts, coupled with the cost of constructing new welcome centers at these locations, the economic benefit to the region that would be attributable to the construction of these new centers appears to be minimal at best. The lone exception is the Karlan site on Route 58. It is feasible that this site could become a destination for tourists due to its historic nature and the plans to create a state park on the property. These facts, coupled with the opening of the new tunnel through the Cumberland Gap and efforts to revitalize the Wilderness Trail, could render the Karlan site an important role in providing traveler information to visitors to Southwest Virginia.

Finally, it should be noted that VDOT has plans to upgrade and renovate rest areas and welcome centers at some 14 locations throughout the state. These upgrades will do much to enhance traveler impressions of the Commonwealth. With welcome center visitation surging (a 45% increase between 1984 and 1993), staffing also needs to be addressed. The ability level of two VDT counselors per location does not appear to keep up with demand, especially given Virginia's recent new attractions, such as *Nauticus* in Norfolk, *Valentine Riverside* in Richmond, and *Explore* in Roanoke. If staffing continues at current levels, other means of providing information at these welcome centers appear necessary, such as interactive kiosks containing data bases of information on attractions, restaurants, lodging, and sports events. This option, coupled with the tourist information provided at Virginia's 36 local/regional tourist information centers, will certainly aid in providing accessible local and statewide travel information.

In the task force's view, providing regional tourist information about attractions in Southwest Virginia at the state's existing welcome centers in informational kiosks and at the local/regional tourist information centers is the best means of enticing tourists to that region. These efforts, combined with the development of the Karlan site on Route 58, should do two things to bring tourists to the area. First, more information about Southwest Virginia will be available to more people. It should be remembered that, in 1993, the combined visitation at interstate welcome centers and local/regional tourist information centers exceeded three million visitors. Second, the Karlan site, if developed as planned, can serve as a tourist destination and thus has the potential to draw a significant number of travelers to the Southwest Virginia region, who, once there, can be provided with information about lodging, attractions, events, etc., throughout the region.

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INTRODUCTION

On January 25, 1994, the General Assembly offered Senate Joint Resolution 179 (SJR 179) (see Appendix A), which requested that the Virginia Department of Transportation (VDOT) study the feasibility of adding new welcome centers and refurbishing others as a means of promoting tourism opportunities in Southwest Virginia. Specifically, the resolution asked VDOT (1) to work toward determining new sites for welcome centers and upgrading, enhancing, renovating, and expanding existing welcome centers and rest areas in order to promote and entice tourism and (2) to study the feasibility of locating additional welcome centers at major entrances to Southwest Virginia from neighboring states and increasing staffing at existing centers in that region, thus establishing these as a "point of entry." The resolution also urged that VDOT, the Virginia Division of Tourism (VDT), and local tourism agencies, as partners, aggressively continue to promote tourism, especially in the rural portions of the Commonwealth.

The patrons of SJR 179 pointed out that tourism is critical to Virginia's economy in particular and to the diversification of Southwest Virginia's economy specifically. They also pointed out that the initial impression of travelers when they enter the Commonwealth is often made at welcome centers, which are typically located at points of entry adjacent to interstate highways. This impression "sets the stage" as to how Virginia is viewed by these travelers with respect to the tourist-oriented services and facilities. Thus, in the patrons' view, the upgrading, enhancing, renovation, or expansion of welcome center locations, especially in Southwest Virginia, should help promote tourism opportunities in the region.

This report, prepared in response to SJR 179, presents the findings of a task force created to address the resolution. Members of the task force were Penny Forrest, Assistant State Maintenance Engineer; Leo Rutledge, Urban Programs Engineer; Don Wells, Transportation Engineering Programs Supervisor; Al Bryan, Environmental Program Analyst; Fred Kiiffner, Transportation Engineering Programs Supervisor (all from VDOT); Mark Brown, Research Manager; Jeanne Wine, Office Manager (both from VDT); and Michael Perfater, Transportation Research Manager from VDOT's Research Council (VTRC).

HISTORY AND PROFILE OF WELCOME CENTERS/REST AREAS IN VIRGINIA

Along with the establishment of the interstate system, the federal government recommended the creation of rest stops for the safety and comfort of travelers. In the early 1960s, VDOT developed a master plan for the inclusion of rest areas in the design and construction of Virginia's interstate system. Working with the Federal Highway Administration (FHWA) and the Virginia Fine Arts Committee, VDOT established sites and building designs for these facilities. The rest areas were designed to contain restroom facilities; parking for trucks, campers, and automobiles; and other amenities such as picnic tables, grills, water fountains, and walkways designed to add to the comfort of motorists.

There are 41 rest areas in Virginia. Ten of the rest areas located near the state borders are combined with welcome centers. Nine welcome centers are located on the interstates, and one is located on Route 13 on the Eastern Shore of Virginia (Figure 1). Historically, the objective of these centers has been to provide hospitality and quick, accurate responses to travel questions. This service was thought to promote longer stays and, therefore, greater expenditures in Virginia. The welcome centers are staffed by VDT travel counselors who assist visitors with routing and vacation planning while also answering inquiries regarding the state's attractions and accommodations. The travel counselors are encouraged to direct visitors to all regions and attractions within the state and to assist in enhancing the visitor's travel experience in the hopes of encouraging return visits. Hundreds of free travel brochures and publications from throughout the state are available at each center.

Prior to 1990, welcome centers were staffed and maintained by VDT. That year, due to budget and staffing cutbacks, maintenance of the buildings was transferred to VDOT. In order to offset operational costs for the welcome centers, attractions are charged \$60 per welcome center annually for rack space for brochures. The average welcome center has in excess of 500 brochures, yielding a per location average income of \$30,000. In addition, VDOT transfers \$450,000 annually to VDT from the Highway Maintenance and Operating Fund to further supplement the operational costs.

In addition to the ten welcome centers, VDT recognizes and supports 36 local/regional visitor centers throughout Virginia (Figure 2). To be recognized by VDT, and to receive appropriate VDT services, a minimum of 75 different brochures promoting attractions throughout the state must be displayed at the center. Much of this information, however, is oriented toward local and regional attractions. Regional centers are operated by nonprofit groups such as local governments, chambers of commerce, or designated tourism promotion organizations. VDOT's only role in the operation of these centers is the fabrication and erection of informational signs designating their location.

The role of welcome centers and local tourist information centers will be changing as new technologies become available. Other states, such as California and Arizona, are using computerized informational kiosks to provide a number of services to their

EXISTING VIRGINIA WELCOME CENTERS

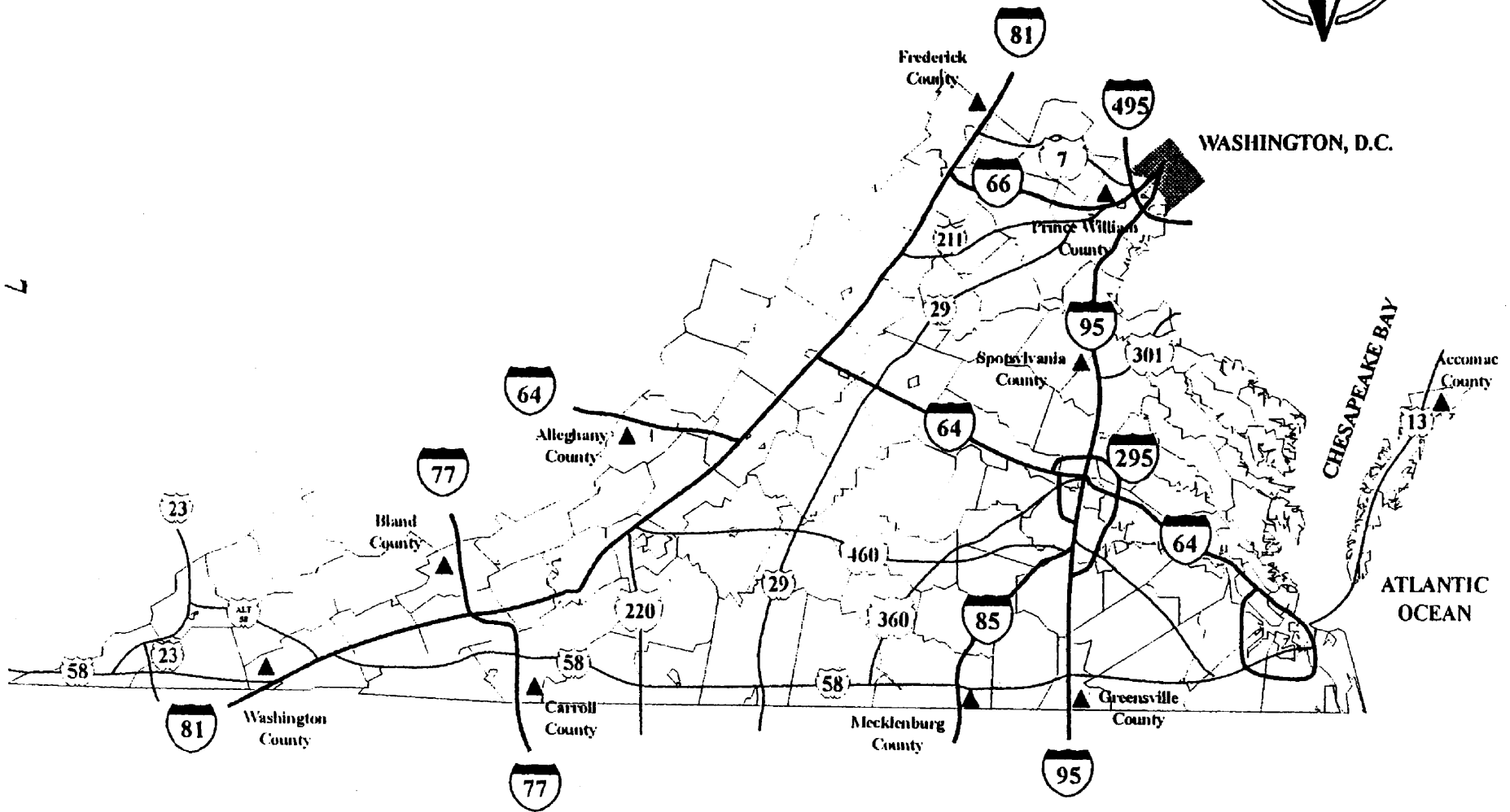
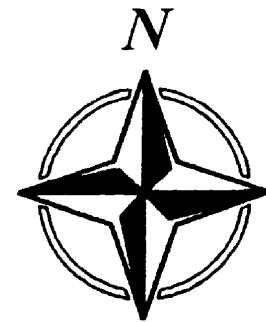


Figure 1

LOCAL/REGIONAL TOURIST INFORMATION CENTERS

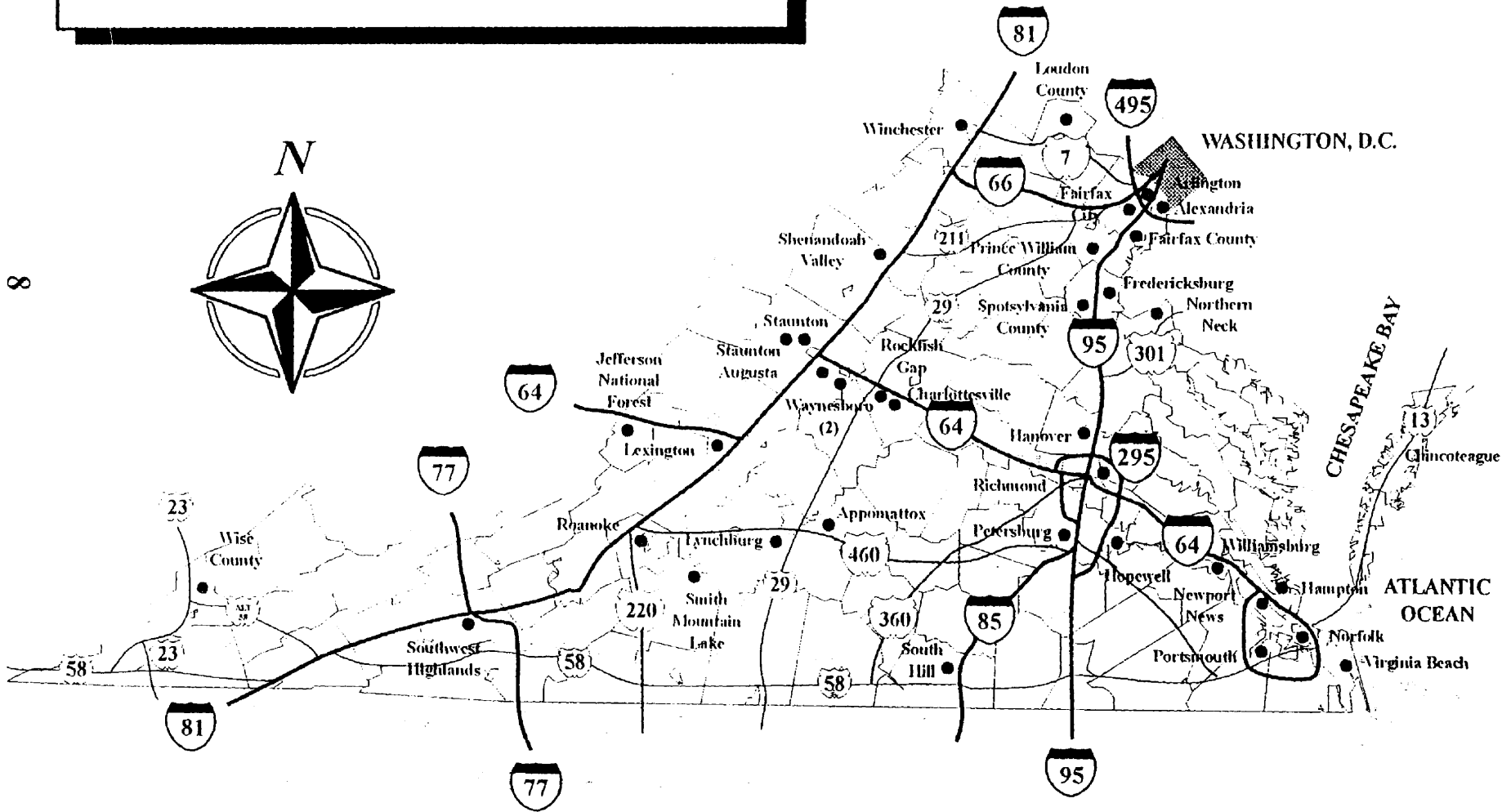


Figure 2

customers. Many of the kiosks are interactive, meaning that a person can request and obtain specific information instantaneously. Hotel reservations can be made and paid for through credit card transactions, tickets to special events can be ordered, and trip routing can be requested. Many of the services provided by the staffs at the centers can thus now be provided through the kiosks. Although it is likely that personal customer service cannot be completely replaced, this interactive technology offers the opportunity for retrieving quick travel-related information at any time and potentially any location. VDT is actively pursuing the feasibility of deploying informational kiosks at welcome centers in Virginia.

The function of welcome centers has changed considerably in the past 30 years. What were once planning stops for many vacationers where they could decide how they would spend their time in Virginia are now, more often than not, simply a source of quick information and directions as travelers take a break from driving. A facility to entice visitors appears no longer to be the primary function of these roadside stops. Travel-related information can now be obtained from countless sources both prior to and during the trip. Thus, as the needs and desires of the traveler change, changes in the role of the welcome center will likely follow.

APPROACH

Overview

In interpreting SJR 179, the task group identified four major issues the Resolution directed VDOT to scrutinize:

1. to work toward determining new welcome center sites in the Commonwealth
2. to examine the feasibility of establishing new welcome centers in Southwest Virginia
3. to look into the possibilities of enhancing, upgrading, and expanding Virginia's existing welcome centers and rest areas
4. to study the feasibility of increasing staffing at existing centers in Southwest Virginia.

Discussions with the patrons of SJR 179 revealed that the principal purpose of the Resolution was to determine if additional welcome centers could be established in Southwest Virginia that would promote tourism opportunities there, thus influencing the region's tourist business and overall economy. A second purpose was to determine if upgrading existing welcome centers and rest areas in concert with establishing new sites might enhance tourists' impressions of the Commonwealth and thus influence them to increase their usage of Virginia's tourist opportunities.

Since the patrons had a special interest in promoting tourism opportunities in Southwest Virginia and welcome centers currently exist at all interstate points of entry into the Commonwealth (at ten locations), items 1 and 2 were combined and five specific roads leading into Southwest Virginia were considered for new welcome center sites. The task group analyzed the feasibility of establishing these five new welcome centers from three perspectives: site availability and suitability; cost; and impact on tourism and visitation in Virginia, specifically that in the southwest region.

In an effort to address item 3, VDOT's plans for upgrading existing rest areas and welcome centers over the next 20 years were examined. These upgrades are based on VDOT's 1994 Statewide Highway Needs Assessment. In addition, proposed new rest area site construction plans were examined. The final portion of the analysis addressed item 4, the feasibility of increasing staffing at welcome centers in Southwest Virginia.

Data Collection

There are established welcome centers at all interstate highway entrances in the southwest region of the Commonwealth. These three centers are located adjacent to I-81 in Washington County, I-77 in Carroll County, and I-77 in Bland County. In an effort to address the feasibility of establishing additional welcome centers at major entrances to Southwest Virginia from neighboring states, the task group identified five primary arterial points of entry as possible locations for the centers. Table 1 provides information about these locations. For the purposes of the study, *Southwest Virginia* was defined as that portion of the Commonwealth that consists of Bland, Buchanan, Carroll, Dickenson, Giles, Grayson, Lee, Pulaski, Russell, Scott, Smyth, Tazewell, Washington, Wise, and Wythe counties.

TABLE 1
Prospective Southwest Virginia Welcome Center Sites

Site No.	Route No.	Jurisdiction	VDOT District	Roadway Type
1	58	Lee County	Bristol	Two-lane primary
2	23	Scott County	Bristol	Four-lane primary
3	23	Wise County	Bristol	Four-lane primary
4	460	Tazewell County	Bristol	Four-lane primary
5	460	Giles County	Salem	Four-lane primary

For each of the five sites, various site-specific data were assembled. In developing this information, the task group drew heavily upon data available on the design, construction, and operational aspects (including the costs) of Virginia's existing rest areas and welcome centers, coupled with VDOT's and VDT's past practices in the development of these facilities. Information gathered included:

- estimates of the fair market value of land
- estimates of the cost to construct facilities at these sites including buildings, utilities, and other amenities typically found at welcome centers
- estimates of the cost to construct parking facilities and means of ingress and egress
- estimates of the costs to maintain and staff the facilities
- traffic forecasts for the primary routes adjacent to the proposed sites

In addition, information that was deemed pertinent regarding general economic and specific tourism activity in the Southwest Virginia was also assembled. It included:

- commuting patterns (of special importance here was the distinguishing of local vs. non-local traffic volumes)
- visitation rates and other pertinent and available information regarding the operation of the Big Stone Gap Regional Tourist Information Center, which lies in the heart of Southwest Virginia.

Finally, information of a more general nature regarding overall visitation and spending trends in Virginia was gathered including:

- visitation rates and user profiles of visitors at Virginia's 10 interstate welcome centers
- main line traffic counts at interstate welcome center locations
- visitation trends at Virginia's 35 local/regional visitor centers
- visitor spending trends in Virginia
- out-of-state visitation trends in Virginia
- previous welcome center/visitation/tourism research studies conducted by VDT, VDOT, and other states

- Virginia's long-range plan for the upgrade of existing rest facilities and the establishment of new locations for the next 20 years.

POTENTIAL NEW SITES IN SOUTHWEST VIRGINIA

The five locations that were considered for welcome centers on non-interstate routes in Southwest Virginia are shown in Figure 3. These sites are adjacent to all four-lane primary roads entering the state in the region plus Route 58, which is currently under construction for widening to four lanes. Four of the sites are located in the Bristol construction district, and one site is in the Salem construction district. The sites were analyzed based on site availability and suitability, costs, and potential impact on tourism and visitation in Southwest Virginia. The sites on Routes 23 and 460 would be new locations and thus can be analyzed in a similar fashion. The Route 58 site, known as the Karlan property, is owned by the Virginia Department of Conservation and Recreation. Long-range plans there include the construction of a state park and the renovation of several structures on the site. Since the site differs substantially from the other four, there are a number of site-specific issues that are addressed for this location only.

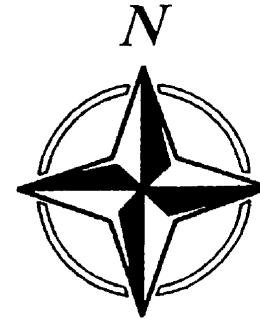
Site Availability and Suitability

One of most important considerations in establishing a new welcome center is the availability of land and utilities at the sites. Although welcome centers have usually been located within two miles of the state's border, for this study, the distance was extended to five miles to ensure the availability of land that could be developed. Historically, welcome centers have required five acres of land. Thus, this analysis focused on the availability of five-acre tracts within five miles of Virginia's border.

An examination of the point-of-entry sites revealed that five-acre tracts are likely to be available at four locations. The acreage necessary to house a typical welcome center facility is sufficient at the Karlan site. In addition, water, sewage, and electrical services appear to be available at all five locations.

Although five-acre tracts appear to be available at each of the desired locations, it is unknown if property owners would be willing to sell their land. There exists the possibility that the Commonwealth might have to exercise its power of eminent domain to acquire some or all of the properties necessary to construct the candidate welcome centers. Although this power has not yet been used to acquire a capital outlay project site for Virginia, Section 33.1-89 of the Code of Virginia, as amended, states that "the

PROPOSED SOUTHWEST VIRGINIA WELCOME CENTERS



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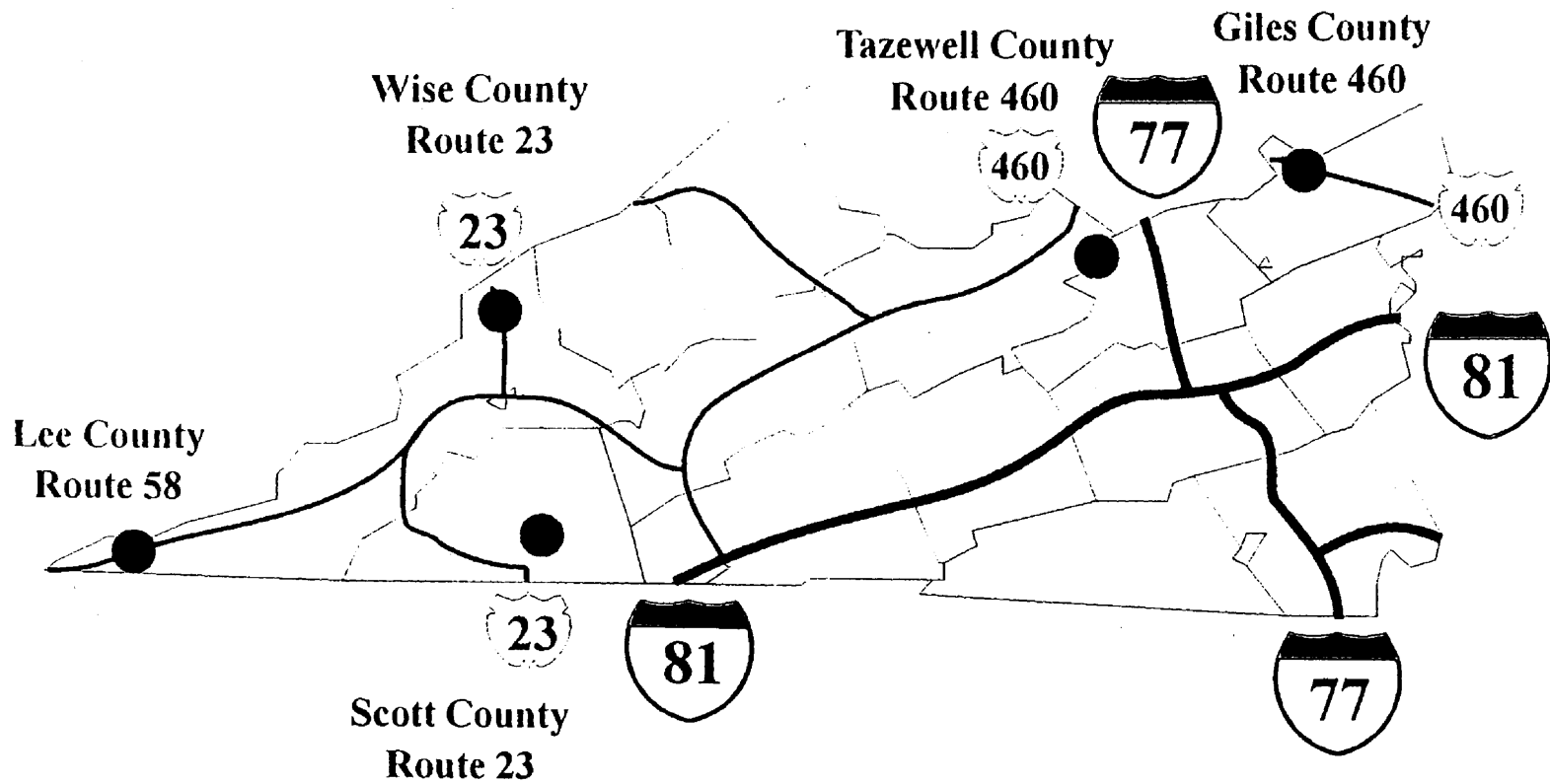


Figure 3

Commonwealth Transportation Commissioner is hereby vested with the power to acquire by . . . the power of eminent domain such lands . . . deemed to be necessary for the construction, reconstruction, alteration, maintenance and repair of the public highways of the State . . . and all purposes incidental hereto . . .”

In September 1988, The Office of the Attorney General of the Commonwealth of Virginia issued an opinion regarding this issue. The opinion stated:

The question that arises is whether welcome centers are “incidental” to public highways. To the extent these centers are used for transportation information and rest area functions. . . they will be considered incidental to public highways. To the extent that centers are used for . . . economic development within the State, . . . the centers will be subject to challenge as not incidental to public highways. . . . If the VDOT or the Board decides to condemn land for welcome centers, the transportation purpose for the land should be clearly set out in the decision document. In addition, the eminent domain authority issue will be clearly resolved by a legislative enactment specifically authorizing VDOT to establish welcome centers as an incident to public highways. Such a determination by the legislature would resolve the difficulty of interpretation of Section 33.1-89.

The lone exception to possible eminent domain procedures is the Karlan site. The site was purchased by the Commonwealth in 1992, with the intended use as a state park. The planned use for the existing structure is a tourist information center. All necessary utilities now exist on site, although upgrades may be necessary to accommodate large groups of visitors.

Costs

The development of these five sites will require substantial construction funds and an ongoing commitment of maintenance funds for operations and staffing. Several factors must be considered in the total cost of constructing a new welcome center. Once the availability and suitability of the site are determined, the design of the facility is begun. The total size of the welcome center facility is based on its anticipated usage, which is typically based upon projected traffic counts along the adjacent road. The topography also affects the design and thus the acreage required for the site. Water and sewer requirements are also determined during the preliminary steps of design. The completion of these preliminary design steps will yield a reasonably accurate cost estimate for land acquisition and construction.

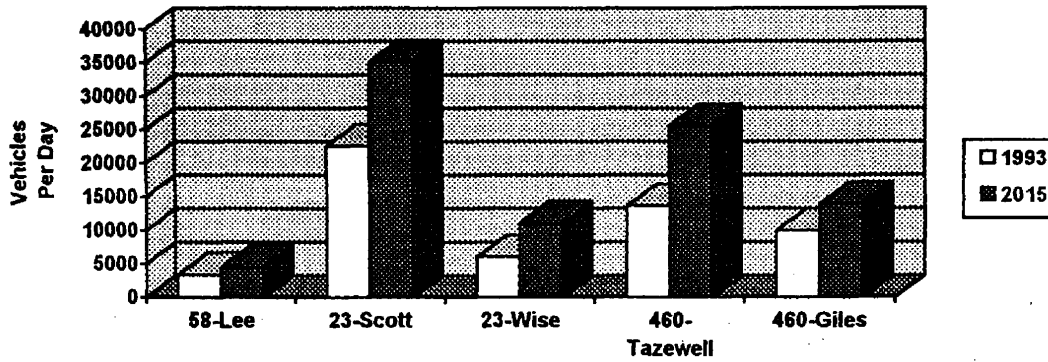


Figure 4 Average Traffic Counts

For all of the prospective sites, the 1993 average daily traffic was obtained and traffic volumes for the year 2015 were projected. These figures are shown in Figure 4. The 2015 projections were used to determine the number of parking spaces needed at the proposed sites. The number of required parking spaces and the topography will determine the acreage needed at the site. As the figure shows, traffic is heaviest at the Scott County and Tazewell County sites, with traffic nearly doubling at the Tazewell site in the next 20 years. The parking requirements based on the projected traffic volumes are shown in Table 2. Projected traffic volume is also used to determine the size and capacities of the restroom facilities, water and sewer systems, and other site amenities. Based on these data, the Scott and Tazewell sites will require the greatest acreage and largest facilities.

**TABLE 2
Parking Space Requirements for the Five Proposed Sites**

County	Route	Cars	Trucks/Campers
Lee (Karlan)	58	17	6
Scott	23	95	31
Wise	23	42	14
Tazewell	460	97	32
Giles	460	37	12

Based on the requirements of each site, land acquisition and construction costs were determined. Land purchase estimates are based on current land value in each area, terrain, and land use in the vicinity of the proposed sites. Five acres was used as an average for the land to be acquired at each location. The availability of public utilities is also reflected in the estimated site costs. To establish site development costs, a recently constructed welcome center was used as a model. Current prices for grading and paving were applied, along with adjustments for each location that were site specific. Thus, the

facilities, amenities, land size, and other requirements were not identical for the five sites. Total land, construction, and site amenity costs are presented in Table 3.

TABLE 3
Construction Costs of the Five Proposed Southwest Virginia Sites

Route and County	Land	Design	Roadway Parking and Lighting	Building	Water System	Sewer System	Site Amenities	Total
58 Lee	0	300,000	1,180,000	410,000	0	0	65,000	1,955,000
23 Scott	400,000	400,000	3,146,000	425,000	25,000	250,000	220,000	4,466,000
23 Wise	100,000	205,000	1,180,000	425,000	130,000	225,000	155,000	2,320,400
460 Tazewell	100,000	312,000	2,360,800	425,000	50,000	130,000	220,000	3,497,800
460 Giles	37,500	205,000	1,180,400	425,000	130,000	225,000	155,000	2,320,400
								14,559,600

The costs associated with the Karlan site were derived in the same manner as those for the proposed new facilities. The Department of Conservation and Recreation obtained estimates to renovate the existing structures at the Karlan site, construct new buildings necessary for the state park, and perform other site-specific work such as that associated with parking lots, trails, and landscaping. These estimates are included herein. No estimates for facilities solely associated with the park itself, such as park ranger housing or the camp store, are reported here, however.

Traditionally, welcome centers have been constructed with transportation construction funds. The proposed five welcome centers are in two of VDOT's construction districts. Four of the sites, with a total estimated construction cost of \$12,279,200, are in the Bristol District. The remaining site, at a cost of \$2,320,400, is in the Salem District. Since all of the proposed sites are located on primary roads, it is assumed the source of construction funds would be the primary road allocations. In the 1994-2000 6-year allocation for primary funds, the Bristol District will receive approximately \$118,608,000. In the same time frame, the Salem District will receive approximately \$111,636,000. If the welcome centers were to be constructed using the primary funds allocated to these districts, some previously programmed projects might have to be reprioritized.

In addition to construction costs, there are recurrent maintenance and staffing expenses associated with the operation of welcome centers. As previously noted, VDOT and VDT currently bear these costs. Maintenance costs of welcome centers across the state vary from \$74,000 per location to \$164,000 per location. This variance is a result of a combination of factors including visitation rates, hours of operation, contractual costs, and the source and type of utility services required. With an average maintenance cost of

\$113,616 per location, an additional \$568,080 would be required annually to maintain the five new centers. Privately contracted maintenance forces have successfully been used throughout the state to maintain these types of facilities. It is anticipated that any new facilities would be maintained by contract rather than by state employees.

The cost to staff welcome centers averages \$78,195 annually per center. Thus the annual cost to staff five new centers would be approximately \$390,915. Currently, all welcome center travel counselors are employed by VDT. Each welcome center has four VDT employees, who are a combination of full-time classified and hourly. Thus, an additional 20 VDT positions would be needed to staff the new centers. Recognizing that the current climate in Virginia state government encourages alternatives to staff increases, the task force identified options for staffing these centers without creating additional positions. These include:

- having local jurisdictions or local private organizations staff the new centers in a similar fashion as the local tourist information centers are currently staffed
- contracting the travel counselor services to a private company
- having local jurisdictions fund the new centers
- establishing partnerships with local businesses
- requesting special funding from the General Assembly

Impact on Tourism and Visitation in Southwest Virginia

Welcome centers are a valuable component of the interstate system in Virginia. They provide a safe, convenient, and pleasant opportunity for travelers to take a break from driving and obtain information about attractions in the Commonwealth. Studies have shown that these centers enhance driver safety, promote a positive image of the state, and can influence how travelers spend their time in Virginia. Most studies conclude that the welcome centers do have a positive impact on travel behavior--most important spending--based on travelers self-reporting of the impact the welcome centers made on them.

The question to be addressed here is not whether the welcome centers on the interstate are desirable, but whether additional welcome centers on more local roads would be desirable. At the base of this issue is the question of whether welcome centers are attractions in and of themselves. The task group could find no studies that provided definitive information to show a welcome center as a traveler destination. Studies conducted in 1987 by the College of William and Mary and in 1993 by Virginia Polytechnic Institute and State University do show that welcome centers simply facilitate positive influences on travel behavior rather than cause it. Thus, there is no evidence to show that welcome centers located in a specific area of a state significantly influence travel to attractions in the area. As a general rule, today's traveler reports that he or she most often chooses destinations prior to the trip rather than during it.

If welcome centers are not destinations in and of themselves, then visitation is, to a large part, dependent on traffic passing by the centers. Traffic data from Southwest Virginia indicate that a large percentage of the traffic on the roads is local. Further, the data show that more Southwest Virginians commute out of the area than enter the area each day; therefore, the opportunity to capture out-of-state visitors is low. Daily traffic counts for the roads adjacent to the proposed welcome centers were shown previously in Figure 4. The previously noted studies on rest area and welcome center visitation show that even in the most remote locations, a maximum of five percent of the travelers will stop at the welcome center.

The construction of a welcome center is a large capital investment for the Commonwealth. One could argue that some return on this investment should be required or at least expected. Since welcome centers generate very little income themselves (other than fees charged for brochure rack space and vending machines), the only economic impact that can be expected from welcome centers is traveler spending. The economic benefit to the Commonwealth would be in the form of the state taxes generated by traveler spending. One way of estimating this return would be to use the following formula:

$$NI = \frac{WCC}{5.5\%}$$

where NI is the necessary spending influenced by the welcome center, WCC is the cost to construct the welcome center, and 5.5% is the average tax applied to traveler spending (based on current traveler spending habits and state sales-and-use and excise tax rates). Thus, in order to offset the cost of constructing a \$5 million welcome center, tourist spending in the area should increase by roughly \$90 million over a particular period. This amount is significant given the relatively low traffic volumes at the locations of the proposed welcome centers when compared to the potential influence on spending that existing centers on the interstates might have.

The one exception to the contention that welcome centers should not be construed as destinations in and of themselves is the Karlan property. The historic nature of the mansion, the interpretive gardens planned for the grounds, and the plans to create a state park on the property will certainly make this site a destination for many travelers. In addition, the opening of the new tunnel through the Cumberland Gap will further attract visitors to the far southwestern tip of Virginia. National Park Service efforts to return portions of the Cumberland Gap National Historic Park to its 1780-1810 appearance and further efforts in Virginia to revitalize the Wilderness Trail will both help encourage travelers to make Southwest Virginia their vacation destination. The Karlan site could play an important role in providing traveler information to those visitors.

UPGRADES AND PLANNED CONSTRUCTION

Many of the existing 41 rest areas in Virginia have been identified by VDOT as insufficient to meet the needs of today's travelers. Parking and restroom facilities at many rest areas are not adequate for weekend or holiday demand. Some locations are not air conditioned, thus creating an uncomfortable environment for customers. The rest areas in Albemarle and New Kent counties use a mineral oil system that, although effective, often leaves an unpleasant odor in the facility, thus giving the impression that the restrooms are not clean. All of these inadequacies prevent Virginia from making a positive impression on the users.

In an effort to provide the best possible facilities to the travelers in Virginia, VDOT scheduled several rest areas for upgrades and renovations. New rest areas are planned along sections of the interstate with very long distances between existing facilities. For example, there is currently no rest area between Ironto (just south of Roanoke) and the junction with Interstate 64 heading east. However, to ameliorate this situation, a new rest area is planned on northbound Interstate 81 in Rockbridge County. Table 4 is a list of projects that are currently scheduled for construction.

Although these planned improvements do not constitute all needs statewide, they do represent the types of facility upgrades that are needed at many of Virginia's welcome centers and rest areas. It should be noted that rest area construction funds generally come from the Transportation Construction District improvement funds. Therefore, even where rest area and welcome center needs are great, they must compete with road construction projects for funding.

STAFFING ISSUES

The Statewide Picture

In an effort to address the staffing question, the task group looked at a number of issues and data sources having to do with funding levels, visitation rates, and tourism and marketing strategies. As was mentioned earlier, VDOT and VDT currently operate and maintain ten welcome centers at interstate points of entry into the Commonwealth (with the exception of the U.S. 13 Welcome Center in Accomack County, which is located adjacent to a multilane arterial). As Table 5 shows, yearly combined visitation to these welcome centers has grown significantly over the last decade from 823,563 in 1984 to nearly 1.2 million in 1993. This increase did not result in any staff increases during the period. In fact, in 1990, welcome center staffing was reduced from four full-time travel counselors to two. This move was made to reduce operating costs but, in the opinion of VDT staff, has hampered the ability of the counselors to adequately "sell" Virginia.

TABLE 4
Planned Rest Area and Welcome Center Improvements

Route	County	Scope of Project	Advertisement Date
64-Eastbound	Alleghany	Upgrade utilities, vending, parking, and landscaping	July 1996
66-Eastbound and Westbound	Prince William	Expand parking, add vending, upgrade landscaping	On hold pending resolution of Disney project.
81-Southbound	Botetourt	Renovate building, add vending, upgrade utilities, and expand parking	December 1995
81-Northbound and Southbound	Montgomery - Radford	Upgrade water system, renovate building, add vending, and expand parking	July 1997
81-Southbound	Montgomery - Ironto	New facility	August 1997
81-Northbound	Rockbridge	New facility	July 1997
81-Southbound	Smyth	Relocation - full facility on new site	April 1996
81-Northbound	Washington	Expand truck parking, retrofit HVAC, add vending	October 1994
81-Northbound	Wythe	Full rest area on existing site	April 1996
95-Northbound	Greenville	Expand site, add vending, expand parking	July 1996
64-Eastbound and Westbound	New Kent and Albemarle	Replace wastewater treatment plant	Design funded only November 1994

In addition, the task group learned that continuing education in the form of familiarization tours for travel counselors has not occurred for several years. Since a number of new attractions, such as *Nauticus* in Norfolk, *Valentine Riverside* in Richmond, and *Explore* in Roanoke, came into being during this period, not to mention expansion at Paramount's Kings Dominion and Busch Gardens, it stands to reason that counselors may be unfamiliar with some or all of these attractions.

Tourist information is also available at local regional tourist information centers, which now number 36 in Virginia (see Figure 2). These centers are usually staffed by volunteers and exist to provide easily accessible travel information on a variety of attractions, locations, events, shopping, and accommodations both locally and statewide. Table 6 shows the 1993 visitation rates at these centers, which are open and staffed at least eight hours a day, seven days a week, year round, closing only on major holidays.

The Picture in Southwest Virginia

Visitation to Virginia welcome centers has increased steadily over the last several years. As Table 6 shows, visitation at the three interstate welcome center sites in Southwest Virginia was either flat or down slightly between 1992 and 1993. In addition, in February 1993, the Wise County Tourist Center (located at Big Stone Gap) was forced to withdraw as a state-recognized tourist information center because it could not meet criteria for VDT support. Specifically, the Wise County center reported that visitation rates of sometimes one or two visitors per week during the winter months did not justify it remaining open during these periods. Table 6 shows that 1993 visitation at this center was the lowest for all the centers that reported visitation rates for the year. The center is still in operation, but since it is not open eight hours per day, seven days per week, it is not eligible to receive VDT support and recognition.

Based on the 1992 Virginia Pleasure and Business Visitor Study, four percent of all Virginia visitors surveyed said they visited Cumberland Gap (in the far Southwest Virginia corner), and two percent said they visited the town of Abingdon. A list of the top origin markets for visitors to Virginia shows that Kentucky and West Virginia are not significant sources of travelers to Virginia (Appendix B). West Virginia provides three percent of Virginia visitation, and Kentucky less than that. These findings seem to indicate that visitation to any welcome centers located in Southwest Virginia might be significantly less than that to centers located in other regions of the Commonwealth.

Staffing for the Future

Surveys and research studies have shown that Virginia is perceived as a state with good traveler information. According to the U.S. Travel Data Center, person trips to/through Virginia have increased from 31 million in the mid-1980s to over 50 million in the early 1990s. Nearly 85% of this visitation has Virginia as the primary destination. And although not all information about Virginia is obtained at tourist information and welcome centers, a significant portion of it is. It stands to reason then that these centers need to have the capability of dispensing such information efficiently. If staffing continues at current levels, other means of providing information at these sites may be necessary. VDT is currently exploring an information-providing alternative in the form of interactive kiosks that contain huge data bases of information about attractions, restaurants, lodging, sports events, etc.

Table 5

VISITATION TO VIRGINIA'S WELCOME CENTERS

LOCATION	Bracey	Bristol	Clear Brook	Covington	Fredericksburg	Lambsburg	Manassas	New Church	Rocky Gap	Skippers	
ROUTE	185 NC	181 TN	181 WV	164 WV	195	177 NC	166	US13 MD	177 WV	195 NC	
	Combined Total										
YEAR											
1982	715,03	86.38	46.22	63.91	63.48	123.02	57.66	62.59	89.13	13.75	108.85
1983	808,40	93.23	41.77	59.38	67.12	137.58	56.30	68.32	105.76	59.29	119.59
1984	823,56	104.53	48.33	67.98	63.01	132.02	58.35	70.45	97.15	59.85	121.85
1985	858,91	119.94	53.94	71.39	63.91	119.50	63.46	85.38	92.65	63.40	125.30
1986	890,31	119.93	56.92	74.12	62.00	123.57	71.57	80.86	92.55	65.69	143.05
1987	858,50	108.41	59.66	69.81	55.56	119.08	71.00	78.82	92.94	63.18	139.99
1988	936,22	124.27	63.32	75.43	72.73	125.68	74.11	75.55	101.30	65.68	158.12
1989	944,57	134.39	61.35	75.45	90.60	123.87	74.71	71.14	108.20	65.39	139.44
1990	931,47	141.74	67.26	81.04	84.42	117.51	77.75	80.03	87.73	67.22	126.73
1991	1,027,76	146.15	78.44	80.46	81.75	118.57	96.27	84.43	91.13	68.33	182.20
1992	1,106,28	150.07	91.29	94.05	91.15	122.04	103.05	86.39	92.34	85.08	190.77
1993	1,174,90	169.74	87.17	118.28	94.97	129.13	103.64	89.04	90.90	84.13	207.85

TABLE 6
1993 Visitation Rates at Local/Regional Visitor Centers

	Site	Visitation
1	Fredericksburg Visitor Center	236,050
2	Charlottesville/Albemarle Visitors Center	217,977
3	Alexandria Convention & Visitors Bureau	196,377
4	Virginia Beach Visitors Bureau	161,136
5	Richmond Tourist Information Center	150,325
6	Lexington Visitor Center	99,373
7	Rockfish Gap Information Center	83,044
8	Prince William County /Manassas Tourist Information Center	68,691
9	Portside Visitor Information Center	66,773
10	Hampton Visitor Center	65,426
11	Norfolk Convention & Visitors Bureau	61,163
12	Newport News Information Center	57,520
13	Arlington County Visitors Center	49,018
14	Shenandoah Valley Travel Association	39,754
15	Roanoke Valley Visitor Center	39,234
16	Winchester-Frederick County Visitor Center	37,763
17	Loudoun County Tourist Information Center	33,119
18	Petersburg Department of Tourism	27,763
19	Staunton Office of Tourism (Interstate)	26,892
20	Waynesboro Village Visitor Center	22,832
21	Virginia's Potomac Gateway Travel Center	22,271
22	Lynchburg Information Center	20,523
23	Jefferson National Forest Information Center*	19,665

TABLE 6 (cont.)
1993 Visitation Rates at Local/Regional Visitor Centers

	Site	Visitation
24	Staunton-Augusta County Welcome Center(Downtown)	18,324
25	Smith Mountain Lake Welcome Center	17,733
26	Highlands-Gateway Visitors Center	15,080
27	Chincoteague Chamber of Commerce	14,399
28	Hopewell Visitors Center	8,610
29	Wise County Tourist Center*	3,081
30	Appomattox Visitor Information Center	**
31	Fairfax County Visitors Center	**
32	Fairfax Museum/Visitor Center	**
33	Ashland Hanover Visitor Information Center	**
34	Petersburg Visitor Center	**
35	Richmond Airport Visitors Center	**
36	Spotsylvania County Department of Tourism	**
37	South Hill Tourist Information Center	**
38	Williamsburg Visitor Center	**

*No longer recognized as official.

**1993 Visitation unavailable.

APPENDIX A

Senate Joint Resolution No. 179

APPENDIX A

SENATE JOINT RESOLUTION NO. 179

(reprint)

Requesting the Department of Transportation to study welcome centers and rest areas.

WHEREAS, tourism is critical to the economy of Virginia in particular and the diversification of Southwest Virginia's economy specifically; and

WHEREAS, the initial impression gained by visitors entering the Commonwealth sets the stage for how the state is viewed in customer-oriented industries such as tourism; and

WHEREAS, there is a need to better promote tourism opportunities available within Southwest Virginia; now, therefore, be it

RESOLVED by the Senate, the House of Delegates concurring, That the Virginia Department of Transportation be requested to work toward determining new sites for welcome centers and upgrading, enhancing, renovating and expanding existing welcome centers and rest areas in order to promote and entice tourism; and, be it

RESOLVED FURTHER, the Virginia Department of Transportation be also requested to study the feasibility of locating additional welcome centers at major entrances to Southwest Virginia from neighboring states, and increasing staffing of the existing centers, thus establishing these as a "point of entry"; and, be it

RESOLVED FINALLY, That the General Assembly endorse the Virginia Department of Transportation's role as an active partner with the Virginia Division of Tourism and local tourism agencies in promoting the Commonwealth, and urge, especially in the rural portions of the Commonwealth, that tourism promotion be aggressively continued.

The Department is requested to complete its study in time to submit its findings to the Governor and 1995 Session of the General Assembly as provided for the processing of legislative documents in the procedures of the Division of Legislative Automated Systems.

APPENDIX B

Division of Tourism's Areas of Dominant Influence

APPENDIX B

Top Five Areas of Dominant Influence Origin Markets of Virginia Visitors to Select Virginia Markets

Abingdon -	Bristol, etc.	16%
	Charlotte	13%
	Bluefield, etc.	8%
	Knoxville	8%
	Washington, DC	6%
Blue Ridge Parkway-	New York	5%
	Washington, DC	5%
	Cleveland	5%
	Charlotte	5%
	Pittsburgh	4%
Chincoteague -	Washington, DC	13%
	Philadelphia	13%
	New York	9%
	Baltimore	8%
	Boston	5%
Danville -	Greensboro, etc.	14%
	Roanoke	13%
	Washington, DC	9%
	Charlotte	9%
	Raleigh-Durham	4%
Winchester -	Washington, DC	21%
	Pittsburgh	7%
	Baltimore	6%
	New York	5%
	Philadelphia	3%
Statewide -	New York	9%
	Washington, DC	7%
	Philadelphia	6%
	Pittsburgh	6%
	Baltimore	3%