“Don’t let the perfect be the enemy of the good.” How many times do you think you have heard that phrase? Many people attribute the concept to Voltaire, so as advice goes, how bad could it be? It’s darn good advice in many situations – such as selecting a checkout line to stand in at the grocery store, choosing which pair of socks to wear, or deciding whether to play a cut from Sgt. Pepper’s over one from Rubber Soul. But in the world of public policy, adhering to this small nugget of philosophy can be a trap.
I have been active in public policy seemingly forever, and that phrase has always bothered me. I think there are four reasons.

First, there are circumstances where the “good” might not be good enough. Think of NASA (safety systems are good, but adding backup plans is better), or commercial air travel (pilots are good, but adding copilots is better), or passenger vehicles (seat belts are good, but adding air bags is better) or health care (treating health problems is good but adding annual checkups is better).

Second, people are often fooling themselves when they think that a good-sounding solution will work. In the name of reducing greenhouse gas emissions, California put in place a policy that favored natural gas power plants over conventional coal plants. Who, other than someone in the coal industry, could disagree with that? What policy makers failed to consider was that methane leaks might make a gas plant as bad as a coal plant, in terms of greenhouse gas emissions – maybe even worse. Now, natural gas poses our greatest greenhouse challenge in the world of electricity and we face billions of dollars invested in existing natural gas infrastructure, while we try to figure out how to stop using natural gas. To trot out another cliché, the devil is usually in the details. If bothering to study the data or consider unintended consequences is rejected because it looks like the pursuit of perfection, then moving forward with something that sounds good may be worse than doing nothing at all.

Further, what gets tarred with the label of perfection is usually not even close. Airplanes and space craft still fall from the sky. People still are in danger when driving or riding in cars. Annual checkups don’t stop people from getting sick.

But the biggest concern I have with this phrase is that its use is, above all, a debating tactic. Just rolling out those words doesn’t prove a darn thing. Primarily, “don’t make the perfect the enemy of the good” is used to neuter any effort to criticize what is being proposed. It is a powerful tool because no one can tell you when a policy option leaves the world of bad ideas and crosses into the “good”

zone. That allows an “enemy of the good” proponent to make his or her favorite policy idea look better by comparing it with some impossible-to-achieve standard of perfection – even if no one is asking for perfection, and even if the proposed policy is not particularly good. If you have a criticism, then you must be picking at nits, and you are just looking for perfection. The argument also provides political cover. If a new policy later proves to be ineffective or to cause new problems, decision-makers can say that they never claimed that their solution was perfect.

All of this might reflect admirable debate skills, but it can lead to problematic solutions — the kind of things people later like to criticize government for. The over-investment in natural gas infrastructure is one example. Allowing people to rebuild in fire zones and flood zones, or on seismically squishy landfill, is another.

Of course, compromise is almost always a necessary component of collective action – as is underscored by the lack of progress on critical issues during these divisive times. The latest federal budget deal, for example, probably pleases no one. But the government needs to avoid defaulting on its debt and critical programs need to continue. Collective action is almost always going to fall well short of perfection.

So, what is a policy maker to do? Perhaps the most important thing is to recognize that comparing potentially problematic solutions to “perfection” is a trap. Rather than closing debate, the “perfection” argument can serve as a reminder of the need to perform “due diligence” – to ask hard questions and insist on getting comprehensive and reliable data before casting a new policy in concrete. Decision makers can embrace the good-versus-perfect aphorism while recognizing the obligation to ensure that the option on the table is truly good (and good enough) based on facts – not just because advocates say that it is.