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Drop That Gas Nozzle: New Jersey Is Full-Service Island, and Likes It

By [KATE ZERNIKE](#)
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*Max Brock, a worker at a Wawa in Parsippany-Troy Hills, N.J., on Friday. Self-serve gas was banned in New Jersey in 1949.
Credit Benjamin Norman for The New York Times*

RAMSEY, N.J. -- Perhaps no state in the nation is as defined by cars and car culture as quintessentially suburban New Jersey. The first drive-in movie theater, the sprawl of malls and highways -- "What exit?" -- and a very famous traffic jam.

But there is one thing New Jersey drivers don't do that is second nature to drivers almost everywhere else: Pump their own gas.

And please don't ask them to.

NJ has banned self-service gas stations for nearly 70 years, spawning boastful bumper decals (“Jersey Girls Don’t Pump Gas”) and at least one “how many Jersey blondes does it take to fill a tank of gas?” [video](#) on YouTube.

Since the 1970s, the only other state to do so has been Oregon. But it took the first [steps to reverse that](#) in April, when the House of Representatives passed a bill allowing self-service stations.

Last week, prominent legislators in New Jersey filed legislation to do the same — arguing that it might even help the nagging matter of finding money to fix the state’s crumbling roads and bridges, and noting that the gas station owners who pushed for the ban in 1949 now want to reverse it. They also appealed to those with short fuses, suggesting that New Jerseyans would not have to wait as long for gas if they could pump their own.



Guy Burd Jr. and a customer at Guy’s Auto Service in Washington, N.J., on Friday. Self-serve gas is a hot-button issue in the state. Credit Benjamin Norman for The New York Times

They got no further than a sport utility vehicle inching toward the Shore for Memorial Day weekend.

The State Senate president and his counterpart in the State Assembly, both Democrats, declared that they would never bring either bill to a vote. Gov. [Chris Christie](#), a Republican who proposed self-service stations in 2009, refused even to comment on the proposal. No shrinking violet, the governor has said that he had stopped talking about pump-your-own, because he learned “I get my head handed to me.”

The opposition baffles proponents.

“Nobody can make a sound argument why we should not allow this,” said State Assemblyman [Declan J. O’Scanlon Jr.](#), a Republican who is proposing one bill to allow self-service gas. “The only way to win that argument is if you can make a legitimate argument that New Jerseyans are more flammable than other people.”

“They are a little more volatile,” he added. “We consume a lot more greasy boardwalk food and funnel cakes, so maybe we are.”

But to arguments that self-service gas would discriminate against the elderly and people who cannot reach the pumps, Mr. O’Scanlon countered: “Do they have no senior citizens in 48 other states? No short people?”

Lawmakers keeping the ban in place recognize what a [2012 poll](#) showed: The majority of NJ voters -- 63% -- do not want to give up full service.

“In New Jersey, we grew up with it,” the Senate president, [Stephen M. Sweeney](#), said. “People have gotten used to it. We like it.”

NJ residents spend an inordinate amount of time in their cars, and therefore, in gas stations. Having an attendant pump their gas, they say, makes New Jersey feel special.

“It’s like a little highlight of the day to have that convenience,” Nicole Mills, 39, said as an attendant filled up her Nissan sedan at an Exxon on Route 17 in this Bergen County suburb.

“When it’s raining out or cold, I don’t want to have to get out,” she said. “Especially when you just got your hair done. There goes \$60.”

Nina Conn, filling up her BMW S.U.V., called it an issue of safety, to have an attendant on duty at night. And also, she said, “you don’t get your hands dirty -- you don’t get that smell in your car.”

“When you’re used to a luxury and people want to take it away, you start thinking about what you take for granted,” Ms. Conn, 54, added. “Once you let go of something that we consider a luxury, you’ll never get it back.”

There are indignities to living in a state known for the [oil](#) refineries that line its turnpike (and not coincidentally also has the most [Superfund](#) toxic waste sites). But one plus of being close to those refineries is cheaper gasoline. That, and the nation’s second lowest gas tax, keeps fuel prices here among the lowest in the nation. So there is little appeal to proponents’ arguments that allowing self-service stations might make gas a little cheaper.

The opposition has flipped.

In the 1940s, drivers were voting with their wheels for self-service gas. The owner of a Gaseteria on Route 17 in Paramus, just south of here, prompted a price war when he opened 24 self-serve pumps offering gas for 18.9 cents a gallon, about three cents less than his competitors, who sought the ban.

(When it drove him out of the business, he opened a go-go club in Hackensack, featuring male dancers for female audiences.)

For years, the lobby of small gas station owners worried they would be crushed by big oil companies, which then owned most stations, and could afford to install the modern pumps and canopies self-service demanded.

“They would have been 10 or 15 cents a gallon less than mine, so they would have buried me,” said Sal Risalvato, who opened a station in Paramus in the late 1970s, and is now the executive director of the [New Jersey Gasoline, C-Store, Automotive Association](#).

Now, most stations are owned by independent operators. And owners, he said, have to block off pumps because they cannot afford to hire enough attendants.

But in the meantime, public sentiment has changed. “Not only have people become spoiled,” Mr. Risalvato said, “it’s become part of our culture.” (At the New Jersey Legislative Correspondents Dinner this week, a ballad two journalists performed about the ban -- “Full Serve Pump,” set to the tune of “Endless Love” -- got the biggest ovation.)

The law allows stations that let people pump their own gas to be fined \$50 to \$500 (for repeat offenders). But none have been given tickets in two years.

Proponents of self-service estimate that it could save gas station owners from eight to 20 cents a gallon -- Ebbie Ashabi, the owner of the Exxon here, who supports the legislation, said it cost him about 7.5 cents a gallon to have attendants on duty.

Senator [Paul A. Sarlo](#), a Democrat who is the chairman of the Budget and Appropriations Committee and a co-sponsor of the bill, suggested that those savings could ease the pain of increasing the gas tax, which many lawmakers believe New Jersey will have to do to fix its roads and bridges.

But Robert Scott III, a professor of economics at Monmouth University who wrote a 2007 analysis of the self-service bans, found the savings would be negligible -- three or four cents. And self-service did not save drivers much time at the pump: It took just 15 seconds longer to fill up at New Jersey stations than in neighboring Pennsylvania.

Furthermore, said Mr. Scott, a transplant to New Jersey from the Midwest, “there’s just something great about slipping the credit card outside the car window, not having to get out.”

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