

Opinion: Why we should embrace self-serve gas stations

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THE RECORD

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LAST THURSDAY, Sens. Paul Sarlo, D-Wood-Ridge and Gerald Cardinale, R-Cresskill introduced legislation in Trenton that, if passed and signed into law, would allow consumers the option of self-serve gas in New Jersey.

As executive director of an organization representing independent gasoline retailers in New Jersey that formerly staunchly opposed self-serve, I advocate whatever position my members favor. After a member poll, my directive was clear: A majority, 71 percent, indicated that they would be in favor of allowing self-serve in New Jersey.

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One benefit is convenience. Self-serve would allow consumers the convenience of fueling up at night, when stations usually close because it is unsafe, or not financially prudent, to have an attendant on duty.

How many times have you driven into a station and seen pumps blocked off by orange cones? Those cones do not signal broken or out-of-order pumps, but rather they keep motorists limited to a certain number of pumps that are manageable by the employee(s) on duty. If self-service were an option, motorists would simply be able to occupy the pumps that would have otherwise been coned off due to the lack of staffing.

No impact on jobs

Many opponents anticipate a negative impact on employment if New Jersey allows self-service. However, there would be no real impact on employment, since the self-serve option would be at pumps that had previously been blocked. Additionally, the proposal includes a provision requiring full-serve to be offered at all gas stations for the first three years after the enactment of the law. This trial period would allow station owners and consumers to see self-serve in action and determine their individual preferences. Then, business owners would be able to pursue the option that they feel would be most desired by their customers (full-service, self-service or a combination of the two).

In addition to the convenience, I anticipate savings passed on to consumers. Skeptics argue that station owners would "pocket the savings," but this is untrue for the same reasons that every station right now doesn't charge an extra dollar per gallon — the force of competition prevents it. If two stations each save 10 cents per gallon by offering self-serve, they could both pocket that savings, but once another competitor tries to steal their customers, market forces will dictate that all prices fall. On it goes, until their prices are as low as they can be without going out of business.

Last, most people aren't aware of the transition already under way in the credit card industry, and the effect it will have on how consumers fill their tanks. Due to advances in anti-theft technology, credit cards will soon come equipped with microchips and personal identification numbers. By October 2017, pumps will be outfitted with new processors capable of accepting EMV, the chip-based security standard. Customers will input their PINs when paying by credit and will never relinquish possession of their cards. Motorists using credit cards will be required to get out of their cars anyway. At that point, most would just use the self-serve island, save a few cents a gallon, pump the gas themselves and enjoy the total convenience.

Flexibility

The option of self-serve gasoline gives motorists and business owners flexibility and convenience, as well as financial savings. There is no reason that motorists and business owners here should not have the same opportunities that people in 48 other states have. Self-serve is a proven system for millions of motorists and thousands of gasoline retailers across the nation.

However, if for some reason, the motorists and station owners in New Jersey do not find self-serve to be as desired in practice as it is in theory, there is no law mandating that self-serve must be offered. It would be just an option. And New Jerseyans deserve the same options that 300 million other people in the nation already have.

Sal Risalvato is the executive director of the state Gasoline, Convenience Store and Automotive Association, an organization representing independent gas stations, convenience stores and auto repair shops.