

Road Warrior: Pump our own gas? Fuhgetabout it!

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Say what you will about Governor Christie and Senate President Steve Sweeney, they sure know how to sidestep a political black hole even when it resembles the kind of pothole that anybody with a shovel could fix.

How else to explain why the governor declined comment on legislation that would allow drivers to pump their own gas for the first time in 66 years? Why else would Sweeney refuse to even post a bill permitting road warriors to do something our counterparts have been doing for decades in every other state except Oregon?

Although some consider the ban on self-serve gasoline a Jersey joke, those at the political helm in Trenton recognized what road warriors like Maureen Covone have known all along.

"Jersey girls don't pump gas," said the Paramus reader.

Despite the popular T-shirt, that phrase applies to Jersey boys, too.

"You risk smelling like gasoline for the rest of the day," said Glen Rock reader Lawrence Lipman, "and the odor transfers to the sandwich you eat for lunch."

"I'd hate to see one of the last low-income jobs lost by the poor guys who now have jobs," added Wayne's Sam Jarkey.

These folks aren't alone. A 2012 Public Mind poll by Fairleigh Dickinson University found 63 percent of motorists favored keeping the ban. The percentage among young drivers and women was even greater. In an unscientific Road Warrior poll, readers favored it, too, by a 5-1 ratio.

"It's one of the good things about living in New Jersey," explained Ramsey's Douglas Parker. "Let's not kill a good thing."

As these folks see it, requiring somebody else to perform the messy tasks of unscrewing gas caps, jamming nozzles into openings and watching numbers spin on a gauge is deserving of the same sort of Garden State bragging rights usually accorded Bruce Springsteen, the Statue of Liberty and juicy Jersey tomatoes. "And New Jersey has the best boardwalks, too," added Robert Scott.

When he's not jogging on the Asbury Park boardwalk, Scott, an associate economics professor at Monmouth University, specializes in the Garden State's unique dynamics. His research once measured the socioeconomic impact of pump-your-own gas bans.

"At first, I thought it was ridiculous," Scott said. "But now that I live here, I think it's great."

Here are highlights from his 2007 study published in *Challenge*, an economics journal:

- * Bans offer significant benefits for the disabled and elderly who have trouble manipulating pumps, a group that is growing well beyond the current 20% of the population as Baby Boomers continue to reach retirement.
- * Gasoline thefts are substantial in self-service states — nearly \$2,000 per station annually, according to a 2004 study. But they're negligible in New Jersey and Oregon.
- * Drivers in self-service states tend to damage cars and the environment by overfilling tanks and causing fires and explosions.
- * Thefts and damage raise liability insurance rates, which must be recouped with price hikes.
- * Average wait times are similar — three minutes, 53 seconds in NJ and only 15 seconds less for full-service Pennsylvania stations monitored by Scott's researchers.
- * Self-service stations create low-skill, low-wage jobs that "fill an important need for the less advantaged ... many of whom find it difficult to get work that's not labor intensive and requires minimal English language proficiency."

Senate sponsors of the full-service bill — Paul Sarlo, D-Wood-Ridge, and Gerald Cardinale, R-Demarest — believe their legislation can overcome these obstacles. Switching to full service would be optional, for example, and stations would be required to use electronic devices to help the elderly and disabled summon attendants. Government mandates have also improved pump safety. Even gas odor is less offensive.

Most attendants who lose jobs will be given other assignments, assured Sal Risalvato, who heads the New Jersey Gas Retailers and Convenience Store Automotive Association. Risalvato fixes the losses at 500, but Scott's study suggests 1,400 could be affected.

Most motorists remain generally skeptical. Some think self-service would limit choices for elderly and disabled drivers.

"I don't know how this would work in my town," noted Teaneck's Mike Konn. "Only a few of the gas stations here have more than one island to accommodate those needing an attendant."

Self-service states rarely pursue such breaches, said Scott, and federal disability standards allow exemptions for stations with fewer than two employees.

Skeptics also challenged estimates that self-service could cut prices 8 cents to 18 cents a gallon. "I doubt the money will really be passed on to us," said Oradell's Steve Gellis.

Sweeney agreed. To him, the Sarlo-Cardinale bill is dead.

But Sarlo believes Sweeney will come around once negotiations resume next year over one of New Jersey's biggest political black holes — funding the nearly bankrupt Transportation Trust Fund, which finances much of the state's roads, bridges and rails through its 14.5-cent-a-gallon motor-fuels tax. If self-service can trim the price of gas printed on the pump, it could reduce the impact of a fuel-tax hike that Sarlo calls "inevitable."

Is that enough to persuade lawmakers to dump an ingrained, 66-year-old convenience? Even road warriors like Totowa's David Greasley, who supports lifting the ban, calls it "a complicated issue" that's hard to sidestep.

"If it keeps prices down, I might support it, but if it only increases profits, I'm opposed," he said. On the other hand, he's married to a Jersey girl.

"My wife would be lost if she had to pump her own," he said.