

Pump-your-own gas? No way, says NJ Senate leader



New Jersey has more than 10,000 gas station attendants, who make an average \$9.05 an hour, according to the state Department of Labor. (Photo courtesy Fotolia/TNS)

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Don't go scraping off the "Jersey Girls Don't Pump Gas" bumper stickers just yet.

Two state senators - soon to be joined by an assemblyman - are sponsoring legislation to end New Jersey's more-than-six-decade-long ban on self-service gas. If the bill were to pass, Oregon would be the only state to ban self-serve.

However, Senate President Stephen Sweeney (D., Gloucester), an ardent supporter of full service, said Tuesday that there was no way he would allow a vote on the bill.

"As long as I am Senate president, the ban on self-serve will stay in place," Sweeney said in a statement. "Full service is a matter of convenience and especially important to the disabled, senior citizens, and others who would find it difficult to operate gas pumps."

Senate Budget Committee Chairman Paul Sarlo (D., Bergen), who is sponsoring the bill with Sen. Gerald Cardinale (R., Bergen), came back with his own statement, saying he wanted to "start the conversation on the issue now," as legislators negotiate how to replenish the depleted Transportation Trust Fund.

"We know we're going to have to consider some type of transportation user fee, and self-serve gas would lessen the impact of the inevitable increase," Sarlo said.

Sweeney said he didn't believe consumers would ever see gas price savings and that going self-serve would cost the state thousands of jobs.

New Jersey has more than 10,000 gas station attendants, who make an average of \$9.05 an hour, according to the state Department of Labor. In March, the U.S. Department of Labor announced that it had recovered \$5.5 million in back wages for New Jersey gas station attendants who were not paid minimum wage or overtime in the last five years.

Assemblyman Declan J. O'Scanlon (R., Monmouth), who plans to introduce a version of the legislation, said the bill would not eliminate full service, but would allow choice. He scoffed at what he called "unnecessary government meddling in people's business."

A former foe of pump-your-own gas - the New Jersey Gasoline, Convenience Store, Automotive Association - is in favor of it this time.

The option "allows motorists and business owners much more flexibility and convenience, as well as financial savings," said Sal Risalvato, the group's executive director.

Sponsors of the Senate bill said the self-serve option would enhance motorist safety and convenience, because more gas fueling points would be available in the evenings. Gas stations could offer full-service, self-service, or both, but during the first three years after the bill's enactment, they would have to operate at least one full-service pump.

Stations that are self-serve only would have to provide a calling device and have an attendant available to pump gas for people with disabilities at no extra charge. Stations would be able to offer discounts for self-serve gas.

Oregon is considering relaxing its ban in some rural counties.

Gov. Jon S. Corzine tried to end the self-service ban nearly a decade ago and got serious blowback from some residents in a state where bumper stickers declare "Jersey Girls Don't Pump Gas."

Nearly every state had a ban on self-serve in the 1960s, said Jeff Lenard, a vice president of the National Association of Convenience Stores, but technological changes that allowed clerks inside to reset pumps remotely and the oil crises of the 1970s made self-serve popular.

He said that most stations now see bans on pumping one's own gas as an impediment to sales. A rudimentary calculation shows having an attendant adds at least a nickel to the price of a gallon of gas.

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