



No One Can Drive New Jerseyans Away From Full-Service Gas

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Transcript

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KELLY MCEVERS, HOST: If you've ever stopped for gas in New Jersey, you know it's one of the few places where drivers are not allowed to fill up their own tanks. If you don't know that, you learn it pretty soon after getting out of your car. New Jersey will soon be the only state left with a total ban on self-serve gas. And there is a growing push to change that, but as NPR's Joel Rose reports, New Jersey drivers are not in a rush.

JOEL ROSE, BYLINE: For drivers from out of state, New Jersey's self-serve ban can seem quaint or confusing. But for many locals, it's a point of pride.

GINA STEFANELLI: I like pulling up and I like getting my gas served to me. I don't need to get out.

JIM WILLIAMS: You know, if I had to, I would pump the gas, you know? But I'm cool with it, the way everything is.

JOANN COLLINS: I travel all the time. I just came back from Kentucky and I hate that. You got to pump your own gas. I don't want to pump gas. These guys is nice. They can pump it. They need jobs.

ROSE: Gina Stefanelli (ph), Jim Williams (ph) and Joann Collins (ph) - there was a time when many states banned self-serve gas for safety reasons. Those bans mostly disappeared as technology got better. Oregon was another longtime exception. But last month, state lawmakers there changed the law to allow self-serve pumps at rural gas stations starting next year. That leaves New Jersey as the final holdout.

SAL RISALVATO: We have created a culture in New Jersey where New Jerseyans - where they wear it as a badge of honor that we don't have self-serve gasoline.

ROSE: Sal Risalvato is the executive director of the New Jersey Gasoline Convenience Store and Automotive Association. In a way, Risalvato helped create that culture in the first place.

RISALVATO: When the public was clamoring for self-serve, we kept it out.

ROSE: In the early 1980s, Risalvato owned an independent gas station. Back then, little guys like him were afraid that self-serve gas would give a competitive edge to stations owned by the big gas companies. But today, Risalvato and his organization have flipped to the other side.

RISALVATO: The marketplace has changed. The dynamics have changed. And now it is better for the motorist and the retailers and everybody in general to have self-serve.

ROSE: It's pretty clear that self-serve would be good for gas station owners. Vinny Dua (ph) manages a BP station in Vauxhall northern New Jersey. He says labor costs add up and it can be hard to find workers to pump gas at all.

VINNY DUA: And then in the wintertime, nobody wants to work. It gets really cold and I know 'cause you basically can't feel your hands, you know?

ROSE: But not everyone would benefit from lifting the state's self-serve ban.

ROBERT SCOTT: Can I get this filled up, just regular?

ROSE: Robert Scott teaches economics at Monmouth University in New Jersey. When he studied the issue a few years ago, roughly 14,000 people were employed pumping gas across the state. Add up all those jobs and Scott says you would have the fifth-biggest company in New Jersey.

SCOTT: They're low-skill level jobs. You don't have to have a college degree to pump gas. You don't have to have a high school degree to pump gas.

ROSE: Scott says those low-skill workers would be the big losers if the self-serve ban is lifted. People like Michael Asara (ph), a recent immigrant from Ghana who works at the BP station in Vauxhall.

MICHAEL ASARA: Maybe some might feel, OK, I want to serve my own gas, but to me, it's a form of employment.

ROSE: There are a few lawmakers looking to steer New Jersey away from its full-service culture. Republican Assemblyman Declan O'Scanlon plans to introduce his bill in the fall.

O'SCANLON: And it shouldn't be a criminal act to do in New Jersey what people are perfectly, safely and reasonably doing in 49 other states every single day.

ROSE: O'Scanlon says he already pumps his own gas in open defiance of the current law. But it looks like his act of civil disobedience may have to continue for a while. Democrats who control the legislature say O'Scanlon's bill is dead on arrival. Joel Rose, NPR News, New Jersey. Transcript provided by NPR, Copyright NPR.