

Has N.J. had its fill? Push is on for drivers to pump their own gas

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“Jersey Girls Don’t Pump Gas,” reads the pink-and-white magnet Rob Neumann sells online and at his Somers Point-based shop Linda’s Gifts.

The magnets and T-shirts -- only about half of which get shipped to NJ mailing addresses -- represent an enduring quirk of Garden State life: No law-abiding citizen here has dispensed his or her own regular gasoline in nearly 70 years.

But that concept’s gaining renewed scrutiny in Trenton while Oregon, the only other state with a similar restriction, is debating changing its law in some rural areas.

Some New Jersey lawmakers and the state’s gas station lobby want self-service, arguing it would make gas at least 10 cents per gallon cheaper, would mean quicker service and would help independent businesses.

Others are ardently opposed, saying thousands of jobs are at stake, particularly in South Jersey’s weak employment market. And they say self-service would ultimately hurt seniors and the disabled, who either cannot pump their own or would pay more for full service.

Don’t be fooled by the message on Neumann’s goods. He’d like to pump his own.

“I grew up in Pennsylvania. Even when I was 12 and 13, my mom would make me get out of the car and pump it,” he said.

In a state punctuated and even defined by its roads, how we fuel our cars -- a distinctly Jersey topic -- is gaining newfound attention.

To Pump or Not

“We don’t want it,” said Len Bailey, of Egg Harbor Township, as gas station attendant Sonny Rabbani filled the Chrysler with regular at the Shell station in Northfield. “People don’t like change, anyway. I remember the first time I went down South, I pulled over at a gas station for three minutes because I thought someone was going to pump my gas.”

When Rabbani, 37, goes to New York, he doesn’t like pumping his own gas either. Rabbani, who recently moved back to South Jersey, found the gas station job easily. He wanted to earn money while he looks for a seasonal Atlantic City casino job.

“I’m waiting to find something better,” he said.

Anthony Vicchiarelli, 61, a retired police officer, pumps gas once a week at Linwood Gulf Auto and Tire Center to earn a little extra money and for something to do. Vicchiarelli suggested a law change could incorporate both full and self-service.

“It’s good for the young kids; it gets them out working,” he said.

In NJ, the actual impact on gas-pump jobs is hard to gauge statistically. There is no government measure of how many of the 3,068 to 3,816 gas station employees in Atlantic, Cape May, Cumberland and Ocean counties specifically pump gas, according to U.S. Census Bureau estimates.

But Sal Risalvato, executive director of the New Jersey Gasoline, C-Store and Automotive Association, said the impact on jobs would be minimal. These are low-paying positions -- Census Bureau estimates put them at less than \$10 per hour.

“You see an awful lot of orange cones at gas stations. And even when you can get help, the margins for gas are so small you really can’t afford it,” he said.

His organization 30 years ago opposed changing the self-service ban, but many of those reasons don’t exist today. Back then, brands such as Exxon, Shell, Amoco, Texaco and others operated their own gas stations. Those oil companies could make the investments that smaller operators couldn’t — such as building canopies above the pumps, he said. But oil company ownership is a practice that exists in only a few New Jersey gas stations today, he said.

Risalvato said he polled the group’s members in January 2014 and was surprised self-service had that much support: 77% in favor, 21% against, the remainder undecided. The unseen business benefit to self-service, he said, is people have to get out of their cars. While up, they may be more inclined to buy high-margin food and drinks from convenience stores.

“If you buy \$30 of gas, I make a dollar. If you come into my store and buy a cup of coffee, you spend a buck and a half and I make a dollar. What do you think I want you to do?” he said.

‘People are accustomed to it’

Some gas station owners say the change would hurt jobs locally.

“I just don’t think it’s going to be a good thing. Last time I checked, the economy wasn’t great,” said Fred Wendt, one of the owners of a Citgo station and a Gulf station in Hammonton. “There are people who are going to lose their jobs.”

Linwood Gulf owner Brian McNellis said his business would benefit from self-service, mostly from lower payroll and worker’s compensation insurance for pump operators, but it would also affect jobs.

He has five employees who pump gas -- some of whom have other job duties, such as changing tires -- and self-service may release three of them, he said.

“People in other states grew up with it. Here, people are accustomed to it. Not everybody likes change, the unknown. It’s simple to do, and from a business standpoint, it would be beneficial,” he said.

Satwant Singh, who runs the Sunoco on New Road in Pleasantville, said he supports self-service.

“We can save some money,” he said. “They pump gas, they go. That’s why we want to have self-service.”

The law is the 1949 Retail Gasoline Dispensing Safety Act, which focuses mostly on safety concerns.

Assemblyman Declan O’Scanlon Jr., R-Monmouth, is among those wanting to repeal the law. O’Scanlon said an Assembly version of the self-service bill will be introduced in the fall and will include a three-year pilot provision requiring self-service and full-service. The term will allow New Jersey to gauge what impact the law has and choose whether to make it permanent, he said.

“I think a lot of the same people jumping up around about it will choose self-service when the choice is in front of them. It’s not a burden, people will not set themselves on fire and they’ll be happy to see 8- to 15-cent cost savings,” he said. “There is nobody on the planet who loves Jersey girls as much as I do, and Jersey girls will still have plenty about them that makes them unique.”

Two state senators from North Jersey, Paul Sarlo, a Democrat, and Gerald Cardinale, a Republican, introduced legislation in May that would bring self-service options to pumps.

State Sen. Jeff Van Drew, D-Cape May, Cumberland, Atlantic, opposes ending the ban on self-service and introduced a bill in February opposing self-service.

The bill states that, although the Americans with Disabilities Act includes provisions for helping the disabled to pump gas and doing so at self-service prices, “People with disabilities who travel outside New Jersey find those requirements are largely ignored and rarely enforced.”

Van Drew said jobs are also a big part of the picture.

“All those Wawa jobs are real, and they’re careers for people in a job market that is not great,” Van Drew said.

Van Drew also likes what it represents in New Jersey.

“It’s something that’s culturally different. There are those that want to see it, but I think the vast majority of people want full-service gas. I’m going to do all I can to keep it that way,” he said.

Neumann started selling the magnets and T-shirts when he had a shop on the Ocean City Boardwalk. He sold them because people asked for them.

“People talked about it. It was a laughing reaction. And for some people it was a warning — if they traveled out of state, they would crack jokes like they didn’t know how to,” he said. “It was basically people laughing at themselves.”

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