

## Road Warrior: Self-service getting a boost

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It hasn't been widely publicized here, but overnight self-service is finally coming next year to gas stations that have long been barred from allowing their customers to pump their own fuel. This sea change won't have much immediate bearing on New Jersey, however.

It only applies to Oregon, where exiting your car to get your hands smelly has represented the kind of inconvenience that Beaver State motorists have legally shunned since 1951, nearly matching the number of years that drivers in the Garden State have rejected the practice. When the Oregon ban is lifted — or partly lifted — on Jan. 1, NJ will be the only state in the union to completely bar self-service.

After decades of failed attempts, how did Oregon manage to change a law whose counterpart has remained stubbornly embedded in New Jersey statutes since 1949?

"I realized I had to argue for access, not convenience," explained Cliff Bentz, a minority Republican in the Oregon House of Representatives.

This epiphany came to Bentz after a near-empty gas tank forced him to nap in his car shortly before dawn one day until a station in his rural, low-population county opened for business.

As in nearly every other state, the number of gas stations in Oregon has been dwindling sharply. So Bentz, an lawyer who is used to representing farmers, shifted tactics. Since his state is so large and rural, he argued, the potential for getting stuck on a lonely road dozens -- even hundreds -- of miles from an open gas station, was a genuine safety risk, especially overnight. If drivers could pump their own and pay electronically, he reasoned, this risk could be minimized.

His bill passed the state House of Representatives unanimously. Only five no votes were registered in the state Senate. But the law isn't exactly sweeping.

Mainly to satisfy urban interests, self-service will apply only from 6PM to 6AM for rural counties with populations of fewer than 40,000 — places where acreage is vast and the pool of customers per station is small.

So, Oregon's experience would appear to offer only limited appeal for New Jersey lawmakers like Assemblyman Declan O'Scanlon, a Republican from Monmouth County who has been itching for years to allow constituents to get their hands smelly in the nation's most densely populated state.

Or might there be some targeted appeal?

Although the population of the average NJ county exceeds 400,000, sprawling, semi-rural Passaic County towns like Ringwood and West Milford — when taken together — average fewer than 75 people per square mile.

"If people in towns like that wanted it," said O'Scanlon, "that's the kind of bill I could support."

But do they really want it?

A check of gas-station owners in West Milford didn't turn up any supporters. One even said he opposed self-service, which is now supported by the NJ Gas Retailers and Convenience Store Automotive Association.

But the fact that the main gas-station trade group now favors self-service after years of opposition suggests the tide may finally be turning.

One big reason: Although urban NJ's square mileage is much smaller than rural Oregon's, the number of gas stations in the Garden State is declining at a rate similar to that in the Beaver State.

"When I owned stations in Bergen County in 1978, there were 6,000 in New Jersey," said Sal Risalvato, who heads the trade group. "Now it's 2,400."

Risalvato attributed the decline mostly to fierce competition and severe environmental restrictions, both of which have cut sharply into profits. And as stations go out of business, he acknowledged, access to gasoline declines.

Unlike O'Scanlon, though, Risalvato isn't keen on instituting an Oregon-style policy that applies only to rural locales overnight. He wants much more.

"I see T-shirts that say Jersey girls don't pump gas," he noted. "What we have to do is change the culture by showing people how much they're going to love pumping their own gas."

That might seem be a tall order. Polls show that 70% of NJ women oppose self-service.

Disabled groups and organized labor are worried, too, that self-service gas will hurt their constituencies. And state legislative leaders won't even consider a vote on self-service.

But the man who got lawmakers to begin reversing a 64-year-old Oregon policy is optimistic.

"I don't really know New Jersey," said Bentz, whose entire Garden State experience consists of a couple of hours at Newark Liberty Airport. "But I do know the best argument isn't convenience. If I were you folks, I'd focus on something else — like how simple it's become to fuel your car."

Technology, he said, has overcome the hand odors and fire-safety issues that led to the post-World War II bans on self-service, and legislation can ensure that neither attendants nor the disabled are compromised. Surprisingly, he added, support for his bill was not limited to farm districts.

"The only hate mail I got was from city folk who complained that we had left them out," he said. "Some of them have access problems, too."

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