

## Road Warrior: Re-Inspections would shift to private garages



*CHRIS PEDOTA/staff photographer*

*An emissions test is conducted at the inspection station in Paramus by Lane Gary Saboonjian on Thursday, April 7, 2016.*

**BY JOHN CICHOWSKI**  
RECORD COLUMNIST | THE RECORD  
April 7, 2016

It has taken almost six years, but the Christie administration is making another move to ease New Jersey out of the onerous vehicle-inspection business that has often trapped car owners in long lines. Under a new plan, reinspections for older vehicles that flunk exhaust-emissions testing that is required every two years will be moved to 1,200 licensed private garages. Until now, those vehicles had to return to the sometimes-crowded, state-sponsored stations run by the private for-profit firm Parsons.

Few if any state residents look forward to trudging off to a place where they stand in line with other strangers to watch their second-most-expensive possession get poked and prodded for what one wag refers to as a “vehicular colonoscopy.” So you might think anything that minimizes this procedure would be welcome.

Not so.

“Now I have to go to ‘Joe Bag-O-Donuts’ Garage?” asked Clifton’s Cynthia Kester. “I say keep it as it is and have it done by professionals.”

“Inspections are so infrequent now,” added Joe Bernadino of Glen Rock. “Do we really have a problem?”

“Why is the Christie administration always trying to fix something that ain’t broken when there are tons of things that are?” asked Lyndhurst’s Regina Domeraski.

Like many statewide reforms in the past six years, the reason for this one is rooted in finance.

Starting next month, shifting more than 300,000 reinspections to local garages should save the state much of the money it now pays Parsons. A related plan to shift small, commercial-vehicle inspections to local garages would add to that savings. A third plan to eliminate emissions inspections for cars made prior to 1996 is expected to save \$4 million, according to the state Motor Vehicle Commission. Although agency spokesmen aren’t committing themselves to an exact figure, estimates range from \$10 million to \$18 million or more.

Exact figures are hard to gauge right now, officials say, because the MVC is in the middle of negotiations for a new six-year emissions-inspection contract. Besides Parsons, of Pasadena, Calif., three other companies are bidding to run the program: SGS North America of Rutherford, NJ., A-Plus of Wood Dale, Ill., and Opus Inspections of East Granbury, Conn.

Under the new system, the firm that’s selected will earn considerably less than the estimated \$42 million that Parsons collected annually from the state.

“It’s always about saving money,” emailed Dave Mackay of Ringwood. “It used to be of paramount importance to have safety.”

The main reason lines are shorter dates to two earlier Christie reforms relating to health and safety.

In August 2010, safety inspections were eliminated. At the same time, new cars were exempted from emissions testing until they reached the ripe old age of 5. Since inspections for bald tires, grinding brakes and fading headlamps never seemed to rank high on most New Jerseyans’ to-do lists, eliminating safety checks didn’t draw much criticism, especially when it became clear that seat belts, air bags and other mandated safety devices had helped cut road fatalities nearly in half over the prior 30 years.

While the MVC’s recent announcement to do away with emissions testing for cars that are at least 20-years-old raised a fuss among environmental advocates, it seems likely that the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency will approve this change, as it has done for other states, such as New York, which -- like New Jersey -- can’t seem to meet federal ozone-pollution standards.

The only group that has consistently called for restoring safety inspections is the New Jersey Gasoline, Convenience Store and Automotive Association (NJGCA), whose membership includes the majority of garages licensed to perform emissions inspections.

It would be a mistake to compare these garages to doughnut shops in the presence of the group's feisty executive director, Sal Risalvato.

“Our shops can handle it all, the way they do in New York and Pennsylvania,” said Risalvato, noting that licensed mechanics must adhere to strict state training and equipment standards comparable to the licensing procedures that regulate beauticians, morticians, physicians and plumbers.

But what many of them see while inspecting for emissions failures is “scary ... very scary,” said Association member Tim Arata, who owns Westwood Service in Ridgefield Park.

Scary?

“What else would you call it,” said Arata, “when you end up putting inspection stickers on cars with bald tires or broken headlights or bad brake linings after they pass emissions inspection. We tell owners their cars need repairs. But if they say no, all we can do is let them go back out on the road.”

At that point, these violations become matters for the police, who generally classify these offenses as minor infractions.

That should surprise no one. Typically, the number of crashes attributed to vehicle malfunction is in the 2 percent range, according to National Highway Traffic Safety Administration figures. A 2014 NHTSA study showed road crashes burdened Americans with \$277 billion annually in economic costs — roughly \$900 for each person living in the United States.

Actually, the financial damage is much greater, said the study, because the cost more than triples when societal harm is added to account for loss of life and the pain and decreased quality of life caused by injuries.

Email: [cichowski@northjersey.com](mailto:cichowski@northjersey.com)