



Sweeney on NJ Self-Serve Gas: Never

August 10, 2016

Could letting New Jersey residents pump their own gasoline for a discounted price help them cope from sticker shock if the gas tax goes up?

Senate President Stephen Sweeney doesn't think pump-your-own price cuts would actually materialize and he says he'll never allow self-serve legislation to move forward on his watch.

New Jersey is the only state that bars self-serve.

"I've never been a supporter of self-serve," Sweeney, a Democrat from Gloucester County, said during an Asbury Park Press editorial board meeting Tuesday. "The retailers are controlling the numbers. All you're doing is increasing their profit. You won't see the savings because it just disappears."

Sweeney along with other lawmakers and Republican Gov. Chris Christie are currently haggling over competing plans to raise the state gas tax from 14.5 cents to 37.5 cents a gallon, with disagreement over accompanying tax cuts. The money would replenish the state's Transportation Trust Fund.

The impasse has created a Christie-ordered hold on non-essential transportation projects. Sweeney said he is hopeful for a quick resolution but warned the squabble could continue past the November elections.

"I'm concerned because we're losing economic activity. People aren't working when there is work they could be doing," Sweeney said. "I never dreamed we'd be at this point without having the TTF done. Because of how the state refused to address this in the past, a lot of our options have been taken away. There are no rabbits we can pull out a hat."

And self-serve is not the way to soften the impact of higher gas prices, Sweeney said.

New Jersey has about 10,000 gas station attendants, who make an average of \$9.05 an hour, according to the state Department of Labor. Critics of changing the law say those jobs would be at risk and would push insurance costs higher for station owners.

Sal Risalvato, executive director of the New Jersey Gasoline-C-Store-Automotive Association, said his group until now had long opposed bringing self-serve to New Jersey.

But retailers have changed their position in part because “it’s getting harder and harder to hire employees willing to pump gas,” said Risalvato, who predicted average self-serve discounts of a dime or more per gallon if the law is changed.

Assemblyman Declan O’Scanlon, R-Monmouth, and others in the Legislature rallied around a measure last year to decriminalize the act of pumping your own gas while at the same time requiring gas stations to operate to operate at least one full service gas pump island for three years.

The legislation, which would have also allowed for gas retailers to charge a lower price at the self-service pumps, did not advance.

“We absolutely should consider a self-serve option for folks that want to blunt any tax increase,” O’Scanlon said. “And anyone for a gas tax increase should be for a self-serve option, crafted in a way that folks who want full-serve could always get it.”

“To be against self-serve is to be for maximizing the pain of a tax increase,” O’Scanlon said.

Bob Jordan bjordan@gannettnj.com