

New Jersey Is Known for Cheap Gas. The Glory Days Are About to End.

By SARAH MASLIN NIR
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Pity New Jersey. Buffeted by the misdeeds of corrupt officials, maligned by reality television and blasted by hurricanes, many natives say they grow tired of routinely having to defend their state.

Despite it all, one thing always perked up New Jersey residents: the cheap gasoline.

With prices far lower than in neighboring states like New York and Pennsylvania -- the second lowest prices in the country, in fact (only Alaska charges less) -- New Jerseyans have long boasted about their bargain-basement fueling costs. The low prices, a consequence of the state's low tax, also coaxed many thrifty New Yorkers and others over the state line.

But those gas glory days are coming to an end. Gov. Chris Christie has signed into law a new tax that, starting on Nov. 1, will raise gas prices by 23 cents a gallon, effectively putting New Jersey on a par with the rest of the country.

The added revenue will go toward repairing the state's ailing infrastructure and refilling the Transportation Trust Fund, whose depletion had led the governor to order the emergency shutdown of hundreds of projects to improve roads, bridges and rails.

"The only thing that -- to me -- enticed me about New Jersey was the gas," said Wendy John, who works in client services here, as she filled up at a Shell station near the Holland Tunnel before driving home to Pennsylvania. Now, she said, she would fill up near her home.

The higher gas tax has been embraced by driver advocacy organizations like AAA, which has long argued that the damage done to vehicles by crumbling roadways costs more in repairs than the fuel increase; the average New Jersey driver spends about \$600 per year, according to estimates by the state and federal transportation departments.

Omar Gamboa, 47, a limousine driver from Long Island City, Queens, who was filling up after a trip to Newark Liberty International Airport, said he had counted on cheaper New Jersey gas to keep his costs low, but understood the need to repair the roads. "We have to change the shocks frequently because the roadside here is not in good shape," Mr. Gamboa said.

The higher gas prices will raise the amount that drivers spend on fuel by \$184 to \$276 per vehicle per year, according to data released by the State Legislature.

“If we are not capturing revenue from the users of our roads, in state, out of state, tourists,” said Cathleen Lewis, the director of public affairs and government relations for AAA, “then our choices are: one, our roads crumble -- and they are pretty close -- or, two, we force the taxpayers of New Jersey to foot 100 percent of that bill.”

New Jersey’s infrastructure received a grade of [D-plus](#) from the American Society of Civil Engineers, which, in a report issued this past summer, classified over 550 bridges in the state as “structurally deficient” and in need of major repair work. Mr. Christie, a Republican, has said that the gas tax will pay for an eight-year, \$32 billion reauthorization of the Transportation Trust Fund, and that the money will be invested in infrastructure.

Some New Jersey boosters are unperturbed about losing the benefit of rock-bottom gas prices. Steve Edwards, president of the board of trustees of the New Jersey Hall of Fame Foundation, points to the state’s many merits.

“Whether it’s Bruce Springsteen or Thomas Edison or Albert Einstein, we have the richest talent,” Mr. Edwards said. And, paraphrasing a speech Mr. Springsteen gave at [his 2008 induction into the hall](#), Mr. Edwards added that “there is always another bad Jersey joke just around the corner, but we just come out swinging.”

At the New Jersey Historical Society, James Amemasor, a historian, praised the state for its strategic advantages past and present, recalling its colonial-era military history, its days as a leather production hub, its setting as the headquarters for leading insurance companies and its vital role in global commerce through giant ports in Newark and Elizabeth.

The main reason for New Jersey’s image problem, Mr. Amemasor said, is its proximity to New York. “I always say, ‘It’s very hard to be in the bed with an elephant,’” he said. “New York City is the elephant. It takes over almost everything.”

Still, the steep jump in gas prices comes at an inauspicious time. New Jersey Transit is recovering from a crash last month in which a commuter train [barreled into the station in Hoboken](#), killing a woman and injuring more than 100 other people. Not far away, a federal courtroom in Newark has been the setting for tawdry revelations about the conduct of top officials in the Christie administration involved in the closing of access lanes leading to the George Washington Bridge in Fort Lee, N.J., to punish the borough’s mayor for refusing to endorse the governor’s re-election. A [municipal court judge](#) has permitted a criminal complaint against Mr. Christie, filed by a citizen accusing him of official misconduct in the closings, to proceed.

Even some drivers sympathized with the state.

“I think it’s terrible that Jersey has to go through this right now,” Anthony Rigby, 26, said as he stopped for gas at a Valero station here, near the Holland Tunnel. Mr. Rigby, a construction worker from New York, was en route to Charlotte, N.C., with his dogs.

He was worried not for his wallet, but for the local residents: “They are not accustomed to excessive gas prices,” he said as his beagle, Manning, panted by the window. New Jerseyans are “getting with the flow,” he said. They are “catching up.”

Cheap gas has kept YoungNae Cho, the owner of the Valero station, in business for over 40 years, he said. The station sells about 9,000 gallons on a good day; New Yorkers who come for the discount at the pumps have been essential to his success, Mr. Cho, 82, said.

“Now, when you have here the same price,” he said, “They’re not going to do that.”

There are nine gas stations within about three blocks of Mr. Cho’s shop, with another under construction across the street. He said he feared that higher prices would make it difficult for him and his competitors.

Yet even after the tax goes into effect, gas in New Jersey will still be cheaper than it is in neighboring New York and Pennsylvania, said Sal Risalvato, executive director of the New Jersey Gasoline, Convenience Store and Automotive Association.

“There may be some people that think that the price difference is not enough to cross the border, but we think that most people still will,” Mr. Risalvato said. “People tend to drive from one block to another for a penny.”