



## Bill would set a standard for all auto repair facilities, officials say

By **Mike Davis/The Times**

December 30, 2013

For Assemblyman Reed Gusciora, it's a common "horror story" for automobile owners.

In some cases, it's the radio: A customer waits days for their local automobile garage to install the new radio only to find that — while it's installed and ready to go — it won't turn on. It's not the garage's fault, said Gusciora (D-Trenton): They've been left in the dark by automobile manufacturers.

"Once you purchase a car, you own that car and have the right to take it wherever you'd like to get it repaired," said Gusciora. "Because cars are now computerized, you're beholden to go to the dealer each and every time you need a repair."

A bill proposed in the Legislature would change that, setting a standard for all repair shops — from the mom-and-pop service stations to the massive car dealerships sporting the symbol of a popular automobile brand.

Under the bill, which the Assembly passed last week, manufacturers must make such technical information for all cars model year 2002 or newer available for purchase by individual automobile owners and independent repair facilities in New Jersey.

"As cars have become more technologically advanced, manufacturers have gained an unfair advantage by forcing owners to rely on dealerships for even the most routine maintenance," said Assemblyman Paul Moriarty (D-Washington Township), a co-sponsor of the bill.

"Every motorist should have access to the array of diagnostic codes locked into a vehicle's computer and decide for themselves who they want to service their vehicle."

Currently, some facilities pay a subscription fee to manufacturers in order to use their system. If those facilities don't have such a service, they may be unable to complete a repair, said Sal Risalvato, executive director of New Jersey Gasoline Convenience Automotive Association.

In the case of a radio, the garage can diagnose the problem, order a replacement radio and install it — but without a code from the dealer, it simply won't turn on, Risalvato said: Customers still have to visit a dealer to finish the job.

"It makes these small shops forfeit business that they need for revenues and gives the customers the impression that they're not qualified or as skilled or as expert as mechanics in the dealership,

which is entirely false,” Risalvato said. “The technicians at independent repair shops have the training, skills and equipment but the part won’t work until the manufacturer gives them a code to make it run. They’ve withheld this information, making it virtually impossible to do some repairs.”

A spokesman for the New Jersey Coalition of Automotive Retailers, a nonprofit serving automobile and truck dealerships, did not return a call seeking comment.

Beginning with their 2018 models, the bill would require open access to such systems using any type of personal computer, not a manufacturer-specific model.

Manufacturers would be required to use standard interfaces and a system providing direct access to diagnostic and repair information, including updates for the on-board displays.

Violations could result in fines of up to \$10,000 for a first offense and \$20,000 for subsequent offenses.

Twenty years ago, such a bill wouldn’t be necessary, Gusciora said.

He recalled days when mom-and-pop garages could be found on any corner, able to fix any make or model under the sun. But as more electronic and digital systems became integral parts of the automobile, such businesses vanished.

“It’s cost-prohibitive for these mom-and-pops. Most service stations just can’t do these extensive repairs,” Gusciora said. “You used to have repair places and garages everywhere, but now all they can do is change oil or check your tire pressure.”

Faced with paying a costly subscription for use of the manufacturers’ system, some garage owners cherry-pick one or two brands and became specialists.

Or shut their doors for good, Gusciora said.

“At its most basic level, this is a consumer-rights bill,” Gusciora said. “Consumer choice is crucial to reasonable prices and competitive services. We see this as a way to level the playing field so that independent repair shops can compete and that prices for repairing cars will come down.”

According to the Alliance of Automotive Service Providers, an advocate for collision and mechanical repair shops, body shops have taken a hit as digital technology spreads to more intricate parts of cars.

For example, a body shop can replace a deployed air bag in a car but can’t make it function or work without bringing it to the dealer, AASP-NJ Executive Director Charles Bryant said. Similar situations occur with automatic headlights and other parts damaged during a crash, he said.

“You go to a place where you pay and expect them to fix your car, and they can’t do it,” Bryant said. “It shines a bad light on our industry. It’s just wrong and unfair.”