



Time To End Ban On Self-Serve At The Pump?

Here's why NJ lawmakers say yes

By: John Reitmeyer, March 2, 2022

Drivers in New Jersey would no longer be prohibited from filling up their own gas tanks under a bipartisan bill introduced in the Assembly on Monday.

The push to lift the state's decades-long prohibition on self-serve fill-ups comes amid a sharp rise in gas prices and ongoing labor shortages that have coincided with the coronavirus pandemic.

The measure would require gas stations with more than four pumps to still offer their customers a traditional, full-service option. It has the backing of a leading state gas-retailers organization whose members argue that allowing a self-serve option in New Jersey would mean more pumps could be open for service, likely resulting in lower prices for consumers.

"It is a regular occurrence at many stations to have multiple gas pumps blocked by orange cones because the owner does not have enough employees to work every pump," said Sal Risalvato, executive director of the New Jersey Gasoline and Convenience Store Association.

"Allowing for a self-serve option would allow them to open those pumps, while still offering full-serve for those who would like it," Risalvato said.

New Jersey is currently the only U.S. state where self-service gasoline fill-ups are completely banned. The prohibition dates to a law that was enacted in 1949.

Self- And Full-Service Options

Under the proposed “Motorist Fueling Choice and Convenience Act,” New Jersey gas stations would be able to begin offering self-service fill-ups on a voluntary basis 90 days after the bill becomes law.

According to the bill, stations with more than four pumps would be required to continue offering a full-service option between 8 a.m. and 8 p.m., if they are open to the public during any of those hours.

Stations offering only self-service would also still have to provide assistance to disabled motorists at no extra charge, the bill says.

The legislation’s sponsors said their proposal offers a “hybrid model” that would give motorists a new and possibly cheaper way to fill up, while still preserving a full-service option for those who want to remain in their cars.

“Simply put, this bill will provide choice, convenience and cost-savings to New Jersey drivers,” said Assemblywoman Carol Murphy (D-Burlington).

“Motorists in every other state are able to pump their own gas, and if a consumer wants to choose to not wait for an attendant, that choice should not be denied to them by state law,” said Assemblyman Ned Thomson (R-Monmouth).

Previous Efforts To Lift Ban

This isn’t the first time that lawmakers have sought to lift the ban on self-serve, which many in New Jersey see as a source of pride.

And while prior efforts have failed — including when concerns were raised about how such a policy change could impact the state’s unemployment rate if the change triggered job losses — this latest push is being mounted at a time when many employers, including New Jersey gas-station owners, have been complaining about the effects of a lingering labor shortage.

“It is shameful that so many gas stations have had to close, even during daytime hours, because they do not have enough staff to keep their stations open,” said Assemblywoman Annette Chaparro (D-Hudson).

“It’s time to save our small business community and get rid of the stigma,” Chaparro said.

Meanwhile, the effort also comes as gasoline prices have been surging across the state with price inflation gripping the entire country amid the ongoing pandemic.

Market Turmoil

A gallon of gas, on average, cost \$3.65 in New Jersey on Monday, according to AAA, and many experts are predicting prices could come close to \$4 in the wake of market turmoil caused by Russia's recent invasion of Ukraine.

The price increases are also fueling concerns that if motorists cut back on driving to save money, consumption could drop off so much in New Jersey that it could lead to an increase in the state's gas-tax rate. That per-gallon rate is reset every year to ensure enough revenue is being collected from the state gas tax to keep spending on long-term transportation infrastructure projects in balance.

But the state gas-retailers' group has suggested as much as 15 cents could be shaved off the per-gallon price currently being charged in New Jersey if operators could begin offering a self-serve option that makes more pumps available to customers.

"As a station owner, I know that the self-serve option will bring my businesses significant cost savings that I can pass along to my customers," said Kashmir Gill, who owns multiple stations in central Jersey.