



# Will N.J. Allow Pump-Your-Own Gas Stations? With New Bill, The Great Debate Is Back!

**By: Brent Johnson, March 1, 2022**

A group of state lawmakers just reignited one of the great New Jersey debates.

No, not whether Central Jersey exists, or if we should say pork roll or Taylor ham.

It's whether the Garden State should eliminate its 73-year-old ban on letting people pump their own gas.

A bipartisan collection of legislators introduced a bill Monday called the "Motorist Fueling Choice and Convenience Act," which would allow stations in New Jersey to have self-service pumps and end the state's status as the only one left in America where self-serve gasoline is illegal statewide.

"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," state Assemblyman Ned Thomson, R-Monmouth, a sponsor of the proposal, said in a statement.

Under the measure (A3105), stations in New Jersey would be permitted to offer self-serve, full-serve, or a combination. But stations with more than four pumps would be required to keep a full-service option between 8 a.m. and 8 p.m. Self-serve customers would also get a discount.

"By providing a hybrid model, we can give consumers the option to do what they prefer when it comes to filling their gas tanks, while also giving them the opportunity to save money," Assemblywoman Carol Murphy, D-Burlington, another sponsor, said in a statement.

This is the latest in a long line of efforts to drop the self-serve prohibition, all of which have failed.

It comes as gas station owners say they're struggling with staff shortages and lost business amid the coronavirus pandemic, while motorists are being socked with sky-high prices.

**The bill has the backing of the New Jersey Gasoline-Convenience-Automotive Association, the industry's trade group, which estimates stations could lop off 15 cents a gallon if they're allowed to offer self-service.**

**"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, a member of the group who owns multiple stations in Central Jersey.**

The average price in New Jersey was \$3.65 as of Tuesday, according to the American Automobile Association, or AAA. That's higher than the national average of \$3.61 but lower than neighboring New York (\$3.81) and Pennsylvania (\$3.76), each of which have self-serve gas.

Whether this measure has enough support to pass unclear. It would need to be approved by both the Senate and Assembly and signed by Gov. Phil Murphy to become law.

Murphy said in 2018 he's in favor of keeping the state's gas system as is, arguing it's "part of our fabric." His office did not immediately respond to a message Tuesday seeking comment.

New Jersey's ban was enacted in 1949, with officials citing safety concerns about people pumping gas themselves. One argument you could accidentally light yourself on fire (though that doesn't seem to be an issue in other states). Concern about price protection also inspired the law.

People face fines of between \$50 and \$250 if they pump their own gas in New Jersey, though actual citations for violating that ban are rare.

For decades, New Jersey and Oregon were the last two states to bar self-serve gas statewide. But Oregon allowed it for stations in smaller, rural communities in 2018 and is now considering a bill to lift its ban completely.

Through the years, to self-serve or not to self-serve has been one of the most heated arguments in and about New Jersey. One side enjoys the comfort of not having to endure the freezing cold when they pull up to a nozzle. The other side hates having to wait for an attendant when they can simply step out of their car and do it themselves. Then there are out-of-staters who either don't know the law or roll their eyes at it.

Legislation and lawsuits seeking to overturn the ban have stalled repeatedly over the last 40 years. Top Jersey politicians — from both parties — have often balked at lifting it.

In 2012, then-Gov. Chris Christie, a Republican, said it's "never going to happen."

"People in New Jersey love the idea that they've got somebody to pump their gas," Christie said. "I don't see that changing."

In 2019, Murphy, Christie's Democratic successor, was asked if he'd be open to self-serve to cut down on prices if the state's gas tax went up again.

"I will not commit political suicide this morning," Murphy responded. "I'm not going near who pumps the gas."

A 2012 Fairleigh Dickinson University/PublicMind poll found 63 percent of New Jerseyans didn't want to pump their own gas, and only 23 percent wanted to ditch the self-serve ban.

One of the biggest arguments against self-serve gas has been economic: Critics say it would cause thousands of attendant jobs to disappear.

But sponsors of this proposal say that dynamic has largely changed because the pandemic has altered the job market. Assemblywoman Anette Chaparro, D-Hudson, another sponsor, said it's "shameful" many gas stations have had to close "even during daytime hours" because of staff shortages.

"It's time to save our small business community and get rid of the stigma," Chaparro said in a statement.

**Joe Ocello, president of the state's Gasoline-Convenience-Automotive Association, said owning a gas station was once "a great way to make a living," but increasing prices and labor shortages are "making it more and more difficult."**

**Sal Risalvato, the group's executive director, said many stations have to block pumps with orange cones because there aren't enough workers, and having self-serve pumps would allow them to remove the cones and still offer full-service "for those who would like it."**

**Ed Kahouty, a station owner, said it has been difficult to find attendants because "they can make the same inside a warehouse or a retail store." Ebbie Ashabi, another owner, said self-serve will "put our businesses back on track to compete with our neighbors."**

Another argument for the ban is it's a challenge for the elderly and disabled to pump their own gas. Under the new plan, any station with only self-serve gas must have a service to help disabled drivers at no extra charge.

Former state Senate President Stephen Sweeney, D-Gloucester, said in 2016 self-serve gas would never happen on his watch because "retailers are controlling the numbers."

"All you're doing is increasing their profit," Sweeney said. "You won't see the savings because it just disappears."

**The Gasoline-Convenience-Automotive Association disputed that stations won't pass the savings to customers, saying gas is a highly competitive product and a station that doesn't drop prices would lose business to competitors.**

Sweeney lost re-election last year and no longer controls what bills come up for a vote in the Senate.

A spokeswoman said Assembly Speaker Craig Coughlin, D-Middlesex, is “familiar with the bill that’s just been introduced and aware of the discussion surrounding this issue, and will be taking a look.”

Assemblywoman Nancy Munoz, R-Union, said she supports the measure and suspects the public might if prices do drop. She also recalled instances where it would have been faster if she could have pumped her own gas instead of waiting for an attendant.

“Giving people choice is important,” Munoz said Tuesday after an event opening a new Motor Vehicle Commission office in Springfield.

State Sen. Declan O’Scanlon, R-Monmouth — long a proponent of self-serve gas — called the bill a “great compromise,” joking that the only argument to keep the ban would be if New Jerseyans could prove they’re more flammable than others.

“There’s absolutely no reason for us to perpetuate this ridiculously antiquated and unjustified prohibition,” O’Scanlon said. “It’s time.”