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Why Does New Jersey Still Ban Self-Serve Gas? Do You Want To See That Change?

By: Dan Radel, July 5, 2023

What if Jersey girls did pump their own gas? Would motorists actually save time and money?

Four years ago, Gov. Phil Murphy called it political suicide to weigh in on that debate during a press event in East Orange. Today, he's still adamant about his position judging by the tweet from the state's official Twitter account, "twentyregularcash forever," last week after Oregon took another step closer to leaving New Jersey as the only state in the union that doesn't allow motorists to pump their own gas.

Last month, both houses of the Oregon legislature voted to repeal its decades long ban on self-service at the pump. The bill now sits on the governor's desk to sign.

The bill won't completely end full-service in Oregon, but will enable gas stations to designate half their pumps as self-service. Since 2018, Oregon has allowed gas stations in its most rural counties to do self-serve and the new bill will still require stations in its most populous counties to employ at least one attendant and offer full-service fueling.



A mix of Republican and Democratic state Assembly members, including Edward H. Thomson, R-Monmouth, introduced a similar bill last year that would give gas stations the option to have self-service islands. It's called A3105, or the Motorist Fueling Choice and Convenience Act.

"I think the problem we have is the public. The minute they hear self-service, they think, 'Oh, my God, all the full-service is going to disappear immediately and I'll be forced to pump my own gas,'" said Eric Blomgren, chief administrator and director of government affairs for the New Jersey Gasoline, Convenience Store and Automotive Association, a trade group representing gas station owners. "We've always felt that was never going to be the case. The market would demand some full-service,"

Blomgren said convenience is the main reason for New Jersey to start offering self-service. Savings is another.

"It's just easier for people to jump out of their cars and do it themselves rather than sit in line and wait for the attendant," Blomgren said. He said labor shortages have made it hard for owners to hire and keep attendants. Instead, when they're short handed, they put an orange cone in front of the pump and close it off.



'I'm very on the fence'

"I'm very on the fence with it," said Bill Wheeler, one of the owners of Joe's Service Center on Mantoloking Road in Brick. "It's very hard for us to get the young kids to work. And we're paying them \$15 an hour which is a lot of money to pay people to pump gas, because we don't make a lot of money on it. We make pennies."

On the other hand, the station has been a family-owned business since 1958 and Wheeler said the family likes to talk to their customers when they come in and have the ability to give a teenager his or her first job. His station has just two islands, and he said he likes the idea of the option of offering both full- and self-service, because even with self-service, he'd still need to hire one attendant to handle the transactions.

Some of his customers prefer the full-service.

"I'd rather someone else put the gas in," said Bruce Crandall, 85 of Wall. "I guess a lot depends on where you live, but its hard for me to get out in the cold or very hot days."

For the record, not all Jersey girls are against filling their own cars.

"I think New Jersey should allow for both," said Melissa Bartoli of Chatham. "I'm happy to pump my own gas but sometimes it's nice when you don't have to. More importantly, while self-serve may help lower gas prices, I think we should mindful of the potential loss of jobs if we do away with it altogether."



Would it be cheaper?

It's not that New Jersey drivers are paying hand over fist for the luxury of sitting in their cars while an attendant fuels the tank. The national average for a gallon of gas on July 3, the day before Independence Day, was \$3.535 according to AAA. New Jersey stood below that at \$3.486.

Just a few short years ago, New Jersey drivers paid some of the lowest gas prices in the country. However, in 2016, former Gov. Chris Christie, facing a shutdown on transportation construction projects, agreed with the state Legislature to hike the tax rate by 23 cents in order to fund those projects.

New Jersey drivers now pay 42.4 cents a gallon in state taxes at the pump, well above the national average of 29 cents. Pennsylvania drivers have it worse, and pay the most state tax at 61 cents per gallon, according to wisevoter.com.

And just how much New Jerseyans would save with self-serve is debatable. Last year, while trying to rally support for A3105, the New Jersey Gasoline, Convenience Store and Automotive Association said drivers would save 15 cents on the gallon.

Since Oregon experimented with lifting the ban in 2018 by allowing rural counties with populations under 40,000 to do self-serve, there is some data to compare the two. A Clemson University study by Vitor Melo, a Ph.D. candidate in economics, found that Oregon drivers paid 4.4 cents less per gallon for an annual savings of \$90 for a household with three drivers.

Is that enough to get New Jerseyans to get on board to pump their own gas? Blomgren said a lot rests on how you ask the question.

A Rutgers-Eagleton poll last year found 73% of residents said they prefer having their gas pumped for them and only 22% said the opposite. Roughly 82% of Democrats preferred full-service, compared with 64% of Republicans. And nearly 90% of women said they would rather have an attendant pump their gas, compared with 55% of men, the poll found.

However, when a Monmouth University poll gave people more options, the results were much different.

Just over half of the public, or 54%, supported allowing self-service gas in the state as long as stations are still required to keep an attendant on duty for full-service. Another 43% opposed this idea. A clear majority of 60% were opposed to a pump-your-own policy that would allow stations to do away with full-service entirely.

New Jersey, like most states in the union, placed bans on self-service in the late 1940s and early 1950s. New Jersey's 1949 law, the Retail Gasoline Dispensing Safety Act, cited safety as the top reason to ban self service. Most states also prohibited self service mainly due to state fire codes, but in 1972 the bans started to fall to the wayside and only New Jersey's and Oregon's remained.