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Pump Your Own Gas in New Jersey? Fuhgeddaboutit.

Many Garden State residents are proud to be the last U.S. state to prohibit self-service gasoline stations

By: Ginger Adams Otis, August 7th, 2023

New Jersey resident Nyoami Winterburn knows this: If her state ever abolishes full-service gasoline stations, then baby, she was born to run.

“I will move out of New Jersey. I’m not kidding. It is one of the big perks of living here,” Winterburn said Saturday outside a gas station along Route 4 near Englewood, N.J. “I don’t like to pump my own gas, especially when it’s cold.”

Fellow New Jerseyite Suni Brown, who counts having to pump his own gas as reason to avoid leaving the state, feels the same.

“I like being able to sit in the car,” the Englewood resident said. “It’s just easier for me.” On Saturday, a day after Oregon revoked its 72-year-old ban on self-service gas stations, many New Jersey drivers along the busy commuter corridor that feeds into the George Washington Bridge said they are proud to be the last U.S. state to prohibit the self pump.

There is even a popular bumper sticker that says “Jersey Girls Don’t Pump Gas,” an homage to the Garden State’s 1949 law banning self-service stations for fire-safety and other concerns.

Juan Hernandez, 61 years old, works six days a week pumping gas. “I can pump my own gas but I like to talk to the workers and give them a tip,” said Eddie Valle, who fuels up at the same Exxon station in Englewood on Route 4 to greet his favorite attendant, Juan Hernandez.

Hernandez, 61 years old, spent his eight-hour workday on Saturday bouncing between two rows of four double-sided gas pumps, which rarely lacked for vehicles.

“Many people here know me, they always come in and say hello. I’ve been doing this for 18 years,” said Hernandez. He works six days a week pumping gas, earning enough for himself and his family to send money back home to Guatemala.

Several out-of-state drivers who zipped up to the pumps didn’t wait for Hernandez but jumped out to pump gas for themselves.

Sean Hodel, from Virginia, said he didn't know full-service gas stations existed. Sean Hodel of Virginia says he was unfamiliar with full-service gas stations.

"I have never heard of such a thing," he said. "Where I'm from, you pump your own gas."

Hernandez said some customers do wave him off, even though they aren't supposed to touch the pumps.

"If they say, 'I got it,' I don't mess with them," he said.

Gas-station owners can be fined as much as \$250 for a first offense if authorities catch customers handling the pumps, according to New Jersey law. Insurance companies can also deny claims if an accident happens and it turns out a customer was pumping gas, said Ed Kashouty, who has owned a gas station and convenience store in Lakewood, N.J., since 1988. Enforcement is difficult, he said, as it can create tension when attendants ask customers to wait for service.

New Jersey gas-station owners would consider a 10-to-15-cent price difference a gallon if self-service pumps ever became a reality in the state, Kashouty said. On average, it costs owners 12 cents a gallon to have an attendant at the pump, he said.

However, in a state where gas stations line all the main arteries, pricing is fluid, he said.

"If I raise my prices for full service but the station across the street doesn't, then I'm going to lower my prices," said Kashouty. "Competition dictates everything."

Joseph and Diana Patullo, longtime New Jersey residents, are staunch supporters of having gas attendants in charge at all times—unless it comes at a noticeable cost.

"I hate all the fuss with the machines and I like to stay in the car," said Diana Patullo, who said she feels safer with an attendant, especially at night.

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If New Jersey did change the law to allow for the option of self-service, however, and it turns out to be significantly cheaper than a full-service option, she might have to reconsider, she said.

Even as a full-service state, New Jersey often has lower gas prices than its neighbors, according to average prices compiled by AAA. Jersey prices for regular unleaded gasoline averaged \$3.73 a gallon this weekend compared with \$3.90 in New York and \$3.91 in Pennsylvania, according to the automobile association. The national average was \$3.83 a gallon as of Sunday.

New Jersey has roughly 2,300 gas stations and convenience stores with pumps, according to Eric Blomgren, of the New Jersey Gasoline-Convenience-Automotive Association.

His organization supports a bill introduced in the New Jersey Legislature about 18 months ago similar to the law passed in Oregon that would require station owners to offer full service alongside self-service pumps.

Such a change would help station owners who sometimes struggle to find enough workers, Blomgren said. Some owners now limit overnight hours because there isn't enough traffic to justify paying an attendant, he said.

Even so, supporters of the law are livin' on a prayer, Blomgren acknowledged. "I think a lot of motorists in New Jersey have come to like it and if they hear any talk of a change there's a fear that full service is going to disappear as it has in other states," he said.

Gas attendant Gurjit Singh, 32 years old, said he was happy with his \$14.13-an-hour minimum-wage job, but wouldn't welcome a self-service option out of fear it would eventually eliminate the position.

Gas attendant Gurjit Singh says he worries that a self-service option might eventually eliminate his position.

"The people are very friendly, sometimes they give us tips, too. It's a very pleasant job," said Singh, who has been an attendant for three years.

At another Route 4 gas station, New Jersey businessman Joseph Boines said he would support having a self-service option only if the gas prices stay equal with full service.

"If you build the cost of the labor into the full-service pump price, you're effectively forcing a lot of people to choose self service because it's a cheaper option," he said. "If you want to offer both options, you have to keep the price the same."

Boines acknowledged that he didn't want germs or the smell of gasoline on his hands. "Just have professionals handle it," he said.

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