

Bill to permit self-serve

The house bill, if passed, would allow gas station owners to offer self-service gas pumps within Oregon

Jan Montry

City/State Politics Reporter

Students from around the nation may feel a little closer to home if Oregon Rep. Randy Miller, R-West Linn, gets his way.

Miller introduced a bill on Feb. 21 that would end Oregon's 50-year ban on self-service pumping at gas stations. Currently, Oregon is the only state besides New Jersey to disallow self-service.

If passed, House Bill 2749 would lift the ban and allow gas station owners to offer optional self-service at their businesses, and would set provisions for public and environmental safety. Similar bills have been frequently introduced into the Legislature, and the last time voters voiced their opinion on the issues was in 1982, when they chose to maintain the ban.

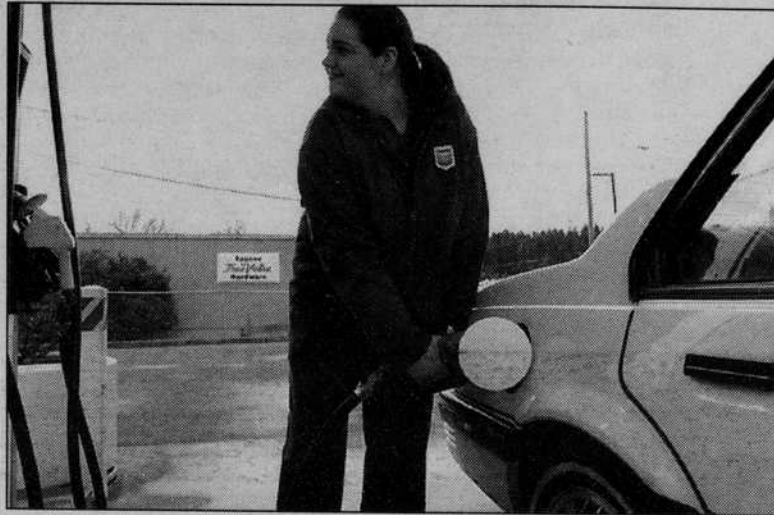
Miller said he is not "overly optimistic" the bill will gain momentum in the Legislature, but he said the idea could be more attractive to voters, given the flailing economy and increasing gas prices.

"As people get more price sensitive, they look for ways to save money," he said. "There is no doubt" self-serve would be cheaper.

In a recent survey, the American Automobile Association concluded that Oregon's statewide average per-gallon gas price rose to about \$1.78 as of March 4. Two weeks ago, at \$1.74 per gallon, Oregon had the 8th highest price in the nation.

Miller also said he has a problem with the state prohibiting self-serve without a compelling purpose.

"I don't like the state restricting



Jeremy Forrest Emerald

Salina Vanarkel has been pumping gas for a year at Chevron, which may allow self-service pumping if House Bill 2749 passes.

freedom without reason," he said.

Current law cites Oregon's "adverse weather" and a potential increase in the crime rate as primary reasons why self-serve is a bad idea. The law says slick surfaces on the pavement resulting from gas spills and weather make it more dangerous for motorists to exit their vehicles at gas stations.

Tim Nesbitt, president of Oregon's AFL-CIO, said his organization opposes the proposed bill because it would result in a loss of jobs and benefits to consumers.

"Our historic position on this issue has been one of opposition," he said. "An optional self-serve system would clearly lead to a 100 percent self-serve system without a reduction in price."

Steve O'Toole, executive director of the Oregon Petroleum Marketers Association, said increasing labor costs due to the recent minimum wage increase, along with competition from "hyper markets" such as Safeway, are primary rea-

sons why self-serve is a good idea.

"What we're seeing is that Oregon has a very high labor cost for gasoline," he said. "The problem we're having now is, with the minimum wage increase, you really have to look at labor costs and what you can afford."

Toole added that some jobs would be lost if the bill were passed, but said that's a normal occurrence when businesses have increasing labor costs and decreasing profits. He estimates that an optional self-serve system would cut gas prices four to nine cents.

In order to comply with the Americans with Disabilities Act, the bill would require retailers to provide service attendants for people 55 and older, people with medical problems and people with disabilities. The service provided for them would be equal to or less than the amount paid for self service.

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