

# Ban on pricing practice faces vote

Supporters hope measure to stop gas zones clears committee

By Brian Lockhart  
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HARTFORD — Freshman state Rep. William Tong said one of the first lessons he learned this legislative session is that “when you go up against Big Oil, it’s a tough row to hoe.”

The Stamford Democrat yesterday said the oil lobby once again may defeat a ban on gasoline zone pricing, a practice in which oil companies hike prices at stations in certain areas.

Today is the deadline for the



Tong

full legislature.

“I think it’s going to be dicey,” said Tong, who has been pushing for the legislation. Oil com-

panies “have been fighting this battle for years. I’ve just recently joined the effort, and I hope I’m adding value. But positions get calcified. Misinformation spreads. It confuses the issue.”



Perone

The co-chairmen are split over the bill, which would pre-

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## Zone

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vent oil companies from charging different wholesale prices to station owners based on geographic area.

Motorists in lower Fairfield County routinely pay 15 cents to 20 cents more per gallon than the rest of the state. In a nationwide survey publicized last month, Forbes.com found Stamford had the 13th highest average gasoline price among more than 200 cities with populations of at least 100,000.

Gas in Connecticut is cheapest near the Massachusetts and Rhode Island borders because of competitive prices in those states.

Some lawmakers from outside Fairfield County say the bill would increase prices in their areas.

“There’s been evidence and studies submitted to the committee from academia and the Federal Trade Commission that indicate . . . it would cause an increase in gas prices through 90 (percent) to 95 percent of the state,” said state Rep. Christopher Stone, D-East Hartford. “That’s what my concern is.”

But his co-chairman, state Sen. Thomas Colapietro, D-Bristol, said zone pricing creates a more competitive climate and provides relief to motorists.

Colapietro cites the effort the oil companies are putting into fighting the proposal, including the commissioning of a Quinnipiac University report that found a zone pricing ban would hike pump prices everywhere except lower Fairfield County.

“I find it very hard to believe that they’re willing to spend so much money to save the consumers money,” Colapietro said.

The legislature has been wrestling with zone pricing for more than a decade. A ban survived a Senate vote last session, becoming the first in the country to pass a legislative body, but did not make it through the House of Representatives.

The idea has become popular among many Fairfield County legislators. But only one legislator from the area is on the committee — state Rep. John Ryan, R-Darien. Yesterday, Ryan declined to comment until after today’s vote.

State Rep. Christopher Perone, D-Norwalk, said he remains “cautiously optimistic” the ban will pass through the General Law Committee, despite opposition from Stone.

House Minority Leader Lawrence Cafero, R-Norwalk, said he changed his position and now supports a ban.

“I was told by lobbyists for

Big Oil it would cause an increase. It was maybe prudent not to change it when prices were \$1.50 a gallon,” Cafero said. “Now this is nuts.”

The Quinnipiac University report issued in February reviewed three years of wholesale prices in different zones and concluded a ban could increase wholesale prices at stations by 10 cents a gallon.

That could translate into a 10-cent markup at the pump.

According to the report, gas prices would drop 5 cents to 10 cents a gallon in lower Fairfield County.

“The people of Fairfield County are important to the legislature. It’s not about playing one geographic area of the state against another,” Stone said. “The ban is very limited in application. It only applies to major (suppliers) selling to their own stations, not the independents who can still price according to zone. Even if passed, it may have very little benefit to the people of Fairfield County, let alone the entire state.”

Colapietro said he will be surprised if the bill is voted down. If so, he said he will try to revive it later in the session.

“I might do an amendment to another bill,” Colapietro said. “If you really believe in competition, this is what does it.”