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# Dems renew fight on zone gas pricing

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The summer driving season has begun and the legislative session ends June 6, so lawmakers are scrambling to resurrect a ban on gasoline zone pricing, which they believe will lower prices at the pump.

Supporters must amend the bill to other legislation to force a vote by the full House and Senate. It was killed by the General Law Committee in March.

"I know it sounds trite to say nothing's over until June 6, but it's not a throwaway comment in this instance," said state Rep. William Tong, D-Stamford, who has pushed for a ban on zone pricing. "We really are working and talking to people."

Those people include state Rep. Christopher Stone, D-East Hartford, a co-chairman of the General Law Committee. Stone and 11 colleagues on the committee originally voted against the bill, which would have stopped oil companies from charging different wholesale prices to gas station owners based on their location.

The legislation also would prohibit gas station owners from raising prices multiple times a day.

Stone confirmed he has been having private discussions with legislators about zone pricing and other ways to lower gas prices, but he did not want to discuss details.

His General Law Committee co-chairman, state Sen. Thomas Colapietro, D-Bristol, who wants a zone pricing ban, said the bill could pass the Senate.

"But in the House I have no idea," Colapietro said. "Chris Stone lobbied hard against it, but he's got people who want to do it, so he's going to have a fight on his hands."

State Sen. Bob Duff, D-Norwalk, agreed.

"I heard from another constituent today who went to get gas in the morning and in the afternoon, the numbers had changed," Duff said. "If we can convince some members of the House to be on board, (the ban) should sail through."

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When the bill to ban zone pricing was killed in March, Stone said he was not convinced the proposal would lower prices.

His fears were bolstered by a \$40,000 Quinnipiac University study, funded by oil companies, that concluded a ban on zone pricing would cause gas prices to climb everywhere in the state except lower Fairfield County. Prices in lower Fairfield County usually are about 20 cents more per gallon than the rest of the state.

Tong has said the report is "junk science." He was trying to obtain the data used by Quinnipiac, which the university and the oil companies have refused to release.

Earlier this month, members of the Federal Trade Commission told Stone in a letter that the ban "may result in increased retail prices and harm consumers by hindering the market's ability to respond to supply disruptions."

The Democratic majority has been facing pressure from Republicans to temporarily cut the state's 25-cent-per-gallon gas tax from Memorial Day through Labor Day.

Democrats on both sides of the zone pricing issue have said the tax cut is a gimmick that would cause "sticker shock" at summer's end. They also say oil companies could maintain prices and pocket the money.

Republicans are unified over cutting the gas tax but disagree over the zone pricing ban.

"We found early on we couldn't make it a caucus position," said state Rep. Livvy Floren, R-Greenwich, who is for eliminating zone pricing. "I've got colleagues who I love, adore and admire who would sooner strangle me than vote for a ban on zone pricing. It's more of a county versus county issue. It's not a partisan issue."

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