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Tong wants profs' data on zone pricing study

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Staff Writer

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HARTFORD - A state representative from Stamford yesterday called on a trio of Quinnipiac University economics professors to turn over the data they used to prepare a damaging study of a ban on gasoline zone pricing.

Democrat William Tong wrote to the professors because he blames the study for hurting Fairfield County lawmakers' efforts to convince the legislature to require oil companies to charge the same wholesale price to gas station owners statewide.

Oil companies "zone" prices by charging gas stations based on location.

The result is that prices in Fairfield County are 15 cents to 20 cents higher than the state average.

But Matthew Rafferty, an associate economics professor, said last night said there is nothing to turn over.

"The (oil) companies gave us data. They own it, so at the end we eliminated the data from our hard drive," Rafferty said. "We don't have it."

He and his colleagues will issue a response, Rafferty said.

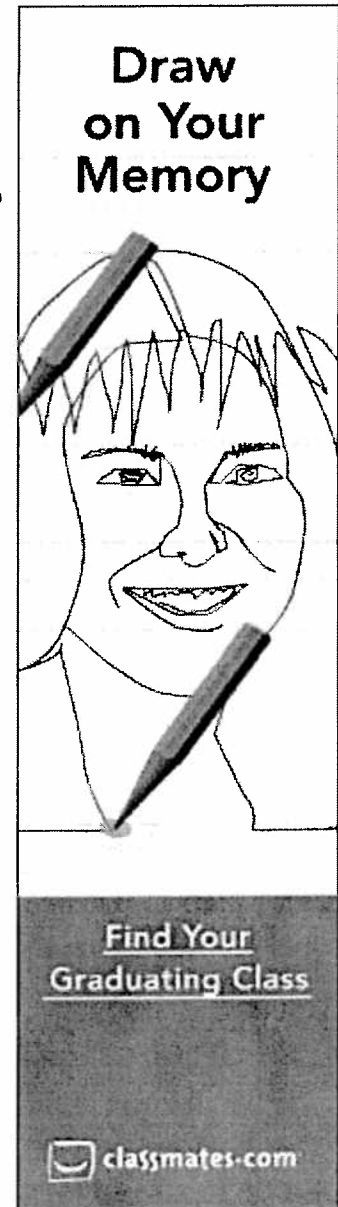
The \$40,000 Quinnipiac study, funded by big oil companies, concluded the ban would hike prices everywhere except Fairfield County.

In March, the legislature's General Law Committee voted the bill down.

It was revived two weeks ago in the Senate, barely surviving an 18-18 vote when Lt. Gov. Michael Fedele, a Stamford Republican, broke the tie in favor of the ban.

But a lack of support kept the bill from being brought up for a vote in the House of Representatives during the final days of the regular session.

During a public hearing in early March before the Energy and Technology Committee, Tong pressed the professors to provide their data and was told it had been destroyed.



Tong yesterday said he sent a formal request to the professors because he remains skeptical of their claim not to have the information.

"They have gone around the General Assembly . . . and (said) that based on their academic and scientific opinion a ban would not result in lower gas prices. They ought to back that up," Tong said. "To come back and say, 'Oops, we destroyed the data,' seems so disingenuous as to not be believable . . . You can't just run up here, say something and hide the ball. It makes me really angry."

He also requested copies of any agreements with big oil firms for the study and the professors' resumes.

Rafferty said that if Tong is looking for proprietary data, he could try to subpoena the oil companies.

But Tong said he is targeting the professors because they have been "peddling" the study and their reputations.

Earlier in the session, Steve Guveyan, executive director of the Connecticut Petroleum Institute, a branch of the American Petroleum Institute, said the oil companies that participated in the study would not allow the study to be made public because it could reveal pricing policy to competitors.

Lawmakers who have questions about an oil company or gas station could set up a meeting with an industry representative through him, Guveyan has said.

State Rep. Christopher Stone, D-East Hartford, a General Law Committee co-chairman and opponent of the zone pricing ban, yesterday suggested Tong approach the oil companies.

Stone said he knows of other examples in which the legislature embraced academic studies without question and does not understand why the Quinnipiac study should be considered suspect, even though the oil companies paid for it.

"We got the report from Quinnipiac. They're professors held in high regard by their colleagues," Stone said. "They're tenured and they received information from big oil. I suppose if you want to question the validity of the information from the oil companies, that's one thing."

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