

BETTER DECISIONS, AT ALL LEVELS, CAN RELIEVE PAIN AT THE PUMP

by Shirley K. Turner, D-Mercer

I don't think I need to reiterate how painful a trip to the pump can be for New Jerseyans fueling up their cars. It seems like it was only yesterday when \$20 could buy you a full tank of gas, at \$1.75 a gallon.

With \$4-per-gallon gas looming around the corner, it's past time that New Jersey, and the rest of the nation, examines the issues surrounding our most recent gas crisis. More than anything, we need to break our addiction to foreign oil, and adopt policies which make the most of existing domestic natural resources, while cultivating alternative energy for our future energy needs.

The key to reversing our national energy crisis is not found in a single "magic bullet" solution. We need a comprehensive, multi-faceted approach to bring real relief to drivers who are struggling to make ends meet while gas prices climb higher and higher.

First, we need to tackle this problem as individual citizens. The easiest way to reduce the impact of high gas prices is sometimes the simplest – we need to reduce the amount of gas we use each day.

Many of us already recognize the individual actions we can do to cut our carbon footprint, including biking or walking for short-distance trips, planning out longer trips so we use the shortest routes possible, and taking advantage of car-pools and mass transit whenever we can. In addition, proper auto maintenance, including maintaining proper tire pressure and regular oil changes, can maximize the fuel efficiency of your vehicle, and extend the life of your car. And driving slower also reduces your fuel consumption significantly.

Employers can also pitch in by adopting telecommuting or flexible schedule to cut down on the amount of time their employees have to commute to the office.

I think flex-time has so much potential that I've adopted it at my own district office, on a trial basis. This summer, my staff has the option to work a four day workweek with ten hour workdays. Not only do my staff members spend less time and money commuting, but by alternating the day off, we are also able to continue our five

day week, offering longer hours of service to constituents who work a traditional 9-to-5 workday.

But changing personal behavior is only the first step towards energy independence. Government and industry at all levels needs to get serious about developing a long-term, sustainable energy plan that moves us away from fossil fuels and towards renewable energy sources like wind, solar, hydro and geothermal power.

To that end, I have sponsored nine separate pieces of legislation on the State level to address issues involving price-gouging at the pump, tax incentives for purchasing energy-efficient home appliances or fuel-efficient vehicles, and requiring gas station owners to be more up-front about the cost per gallon when you pay with a credit card. I've also asked the Attorney General to investigate price discrepancies from one region of the State to the next. While these are all a good start to help alleviate some of the crisis in New Jersey, we need federal lawmakers to step up and help provide some relief.

At the core of any long term plan must be the development of new technologies to reduce our use of gasoline and diesel. We have more or less relied on the same device – the internal combustion engine – to power our cars for the last 120 years.

We've begun to see great progress made with hybrid technology, with some cars reaching 45 mpg already. These hybrids have attracted both eco-friendly and cost-conscious drivers. The automobile industry needs to end their love affair with fossil fuels and make a commitment to developing new hybrid cars that are far better for the environment and drivers' wallets.

But we can't afford to wait for market pressures to move the industry forward in exploring new technologies. Congress must immediately make a dramatic increase in Corporate Average Fuel Efficiency (CAFE) standards, which dictate the average gas mileage car companies must meet.

And in addition to increasing fuel standards and expanding alternative energy, we need to look at domestic energy sources. Unfortunately, alternative fuel will not bring immediate relief for hard-hit drivers. But releasing the nation's oil reserves, and searching for domestic oil and natural gas in an environmentally-sensitive manner, will ensure our economy survives until alternatives become commercially viable.

The bottom line is that dependence on foreign oil is devastating to our economy, and furthers the fossil fuel paradigm. We need to keep all options on the table to bring real economic relief to our State's drivers, now and moving forward. By mixing technological advancement with common sense cost cutters, we can make our current pain at the pump a distant memory.

Senator Shirley K. Turner represents the 15th Legislative District, which includes part of Mercer County.