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Detroit-area car pools catch on as gas prices soar

August 23, 2005

BY CHRIS CHRISTOFF
FREE PRESS LANSING BUREAU CHIEF

High gas prices appear to have more Detroit-area commuters searching for something they've historically shunned -- car pools.

One van pool service said inquiries by motorists fed up with taking a beating at the pump are up 800% over a year ago.

"August is usually a slow month," said Anita Blasius, of the Southeast Michigan Council of Governments (SEMCOG), which links up metro Detroit riders for the private MichiVan pool program.

"Last year, we had 11 new applicants for all of August. We've had 97 applicants so far this month," she said.

While the surge is a fraction of the daily commuters in southeast Michigan, it's one more sign that skyrocketing gas prices are forcing some motorists to look for ways to change their habits -- whether it's driving less, tweaking their cars to get better mileage or trading their SUVs for more fuel-efficient cars.

SEMCOG's Blasius said that the 2000 U.S. census showed that about 200,000 people in metro Detroit use some form of ride sharing to get to work. She said the average MichiVan pool commutes 92 miles round trip.

Patrick Madden, 45, of White Lake Township wants to share a ride to his job in Detroit from his Oakland County home. It costs about \$50 in gas each week just for his 80-mile round-trip commute to work. He drives a Nissan Murano, which gets about 22 miles per gallon.

"My costs have doubled in the past year because I moved and the price of gas went up," said Madden, an information technology project manager at DTE Energy's downtown office.

Want to join a car or van pool?

Check with your employer first. Some help employees arrange rides.

The MichiVan program operates through the Southeast Michigan Council of Governments (SEMCOG). It assembles van pools of five to 15 people. One person is designated to drive and keep the van. The monthly fee is \$50 to \$194 per person, depending on the number of riders and the distance of the commute. Each person also pays a small amount for gas.

SEMCOG also helps people create car pools.

To sign up for MichiVan or a car pool, go to <http://www.semco.org/Services/CommuterPrograms/RideShare/index.htm> or call toll-free at 866-510-7665.

Another private online car pool service is www.carpoolworld.com.

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"It's the difference between going out to a movie and dinner at a nicer restaurant once a month with my family," he added. "As a percentage of my total budget, it's not a huge impact. It's enough for me to look around. I'd like to cut it down to a third of that."

Madden said gas prices have prompted him to notice how many vehicles at rush hour have just one rider, the driver.

Rather than join the MichiVan program, he's looking to form his own car pool, but he's found it difficult to find other riders.

"Maybe more people are interested, but there isn't a good community bulletin board for it," he said.

Van pooling

New inquiries for van service reflect a shift in attitude, said Michelle Grassa, chief financial officer for Troy-based VPSI Inc., which owns MichiVan and similar van pooling services in 39 other states.

"Once people try it, they tend to like it," Grassa said. "It takes a lot to get a person out of their car. It's a long selling process, but it's worthwhile in the end."

Grassa said about 30% of VPSI's vans are used in California, where long-distance commuting has become a way of life for many living in far-flung suburbs.

She said Texas and the Washington, D.C., area are VPSI's second largest users of van pools.

Michigan, she said, is seventh largest, with 142 vans that transported 1,100 people in July. With an average of 13 riders per van, "That's a lot of vehicles off the road," Grassa said.

The MichiVan program assigns five to 15 people to a van, which is kept and driven by one of the commuters. It costs each rider from \$50 to \$194 a month, depending on the number of riders and the distance. They also pay for gas.

Summer jump in service

Another service, www.Ccarpoolworld.com, has signed up 390 people for car pools in Michigan, said Isabelle Boulard, vice president of Datasphere Corp., which operates the online service.

She said there was a spike in riders during August, when 36 people signed up for car pools -- double the number in either June or July.

The most popular area is Ann Arbor, with 42 commuters linked up through the service, Boulard said.

Compuware Inc. has an in-house service that's placed 200 of the company's 4,000 employees in car and van pools, said spokesman Doug Kuiper.

Compuware is the only company in Michigan that contracts with MichiVan service for its employees, according to VPSI.

Compuware lets the van drivers park in the company underground lot as a perk.

The University of Detroit High School has encouraged car pools for several years. Parents get a letter before school starts asking them if they are

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interested. If they are, the school sends the parents lists of nearby students who have also expressed an interest in car pools.

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But as a private school, U-D High differs from public schools that must provide bus service for students who live too far away to walk.

Neither Wayne State and Oakland universities expedite student car pools. Such a service would sprout from student organizations rather than the administration, said Ted Montgomery, communications director at Oakland University.

"We would certainly look into that, if students wanted it," Montgomery said. "We haven't had anyone bring something like that up yet." Montgomery said. "Our No. 1 concern would be safety," he added.

Long-distance commute

One state employee who knows the rigors of long-distance commuting is James Newsome.

He's commuted from west Detroit to his job in Lansing for 28 years -- a 190-mile round trip.

Gas prices "are killing me now," said Newsome, 52, director of the equal opportunity office director for the Michigan Department of Human Services.

"It's a bite. You also have to factor in \$85 a month for parking," he said.

Newsome said he drives a 1990 Mercedes 300 S Class, which gets 15 miles per gallon and requires premium grade gasoline, now close to \$2.80 per gallon around Lansing.

He said he's spending \$100 a week on gas, and is considering a more fuel-efficient car.

Newsome said he hasn't moved closer to work because his wife works near downtown Detroit. He said he carpooled to Lansing for many years, but has driven alone for the past 18 months.

And while commuting alone 190 miles round trip isn't easy, Newsome said he's been in some uncomfortable car pools, like the one that used a subcompact Ford Escort.

"It taught me how to sleep on the road, it was so uncomfortable," he said. "In a car pool, you get to know people extremely well. They become a sounding board for problems, all kinds of things."

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