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Drivers look to Web for carpool buddies



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High gas prices compel drivers in the Triad to double up for their commutes.

By Joe Killian
Staff Writer

HIGH POINT — Janet Coutu remembers the feeling she had when she first got her license. Driving meant freedom and adventure.

But that was nearly a decade ago, when a gallon of gas cost a dollar and some change. With gas now topping \$4 at a number of Triad stations, that feeling has disappeared.

"Just driving to and from work was breaking me," says Coutu, 24, of High Point . "I began dreading those times when I had to drive rather than looking forward to them."

Turning to the Internet, she found a solution: online networks of people looking to carpool.

"A lot of people were like me, and they never thought they'd do this," Coutu says. "But these Web sites show you that there are a lot of people like you, and you can find a ride even if it's not someone you work with."

Coutu's favorite site, <http://carpoolworld.com> , boasts more than 60,000 registered carpoolers — and dozens in and around the Triad. Signing up is free and users can register their trip and use online maps to find carpoolers who travel the same way.

"They let you say if you'd prefer a male or female, a nonsmoker, everything," Coutu said. "It's a little like looking for a roommate, 'cause you are going to share this part of your life with a complete stranger."

Coutu has found a few carmates in recent months — sometimes as driver, sometimes as passenger. Her commute is only about eight miles, but she says carpooling has helped her beat the gas crunch and introduced her to new people.

The same is true for Pamela Milken , a UNCG graduate student from High Point. She says she struck out on finding carpool buddies at work and school — but scored on <http://craigslist.com> . The Greensboro and Winston-Salem versions of the site are active with people looking for carpool companions — and Milken found another High Point-to-Greensboro commuter.

"I've used Craigslist to buy used furniture and get rid of old mattresses, but I'd never tried using it for something like that before," Milken says. "But within like two days I had a couple of people who were interested. I'm sort of trying them out now and seeing who's a good fit."

Not everyone has that much luck.

Vanessa Kearney lives in Pleasant Grove and works as a buyer at Replacements Ltd. When gas began climbing again this year, she started looking to carpool. She posted on three different sites — but six weeks later she's still driving to work alone.

Kearney said she hopes more people will become aware of online carpool opportunities — the more people who opt in, the better for everyone. In the meantime, she's glad she drives a 2002 Acura and gets about 27 miles to the gallon.

"I can afford gas right now," said Kearney, 29 . "But I suspect it will continue to go up, so I'm looking to carpool in preparation for when I can't."

Todd Moreno paid \$3.91 a gallon at the Shell station on North Main Street in High Point earlier this week — and thought he was getting a steal.

"It's kind of pathetic when you feel good about a price like that, 'cause it's still under \$4," says Moreno, 34, of High Point.

He's looked for carpooling opportunities online — but his job as a real estate agent makes it next to impossible. Even worse, he drives a Jeep Grand Cherokee .

"Like a lot of other people, I bought what I thought was a big, luxurious car when gas wasn't that big a worry," Moreno said. "Now I'm thinking the people with real luxury cars are the people who bought hybrids."

Contact Joe Killian at 883-4422, Ext. 228, or joe.killian@news-record.com

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