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Online service helps commuters share rides

Mike Walbert
The Arizona Republic
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Dian Muserelli and Aaron Flannery have a jolly time jousting rush-hour traffic as they commute between Glendale and Tempe.

They chat about the Diamondbacks, shuffle through CDs and chuckle at freeway gridlock when they zoom by in the high-occupancy-vehicle lanes to and from work.

"It's a sick sense of enjoyment, but I love when we pass a whole wall of cars," said Flannery, 27, of Peoria.

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The good friends met six months ago through Sharetheride.com and are part of a growing number of commuters using Valley Metro's online carpool matching service.

Skyrocketing gas prices, frequent high-pollution advisories and a potential bus strike last month have led to a surge in interested carpoolers going online.

Valley Metro reported 1,496 people sought carpool buddies on Sharetheride.com in June, a 78 percent increase over May's 839, said Randi Alcott, Valley Metro ride-share manager. Additionally, the number of online requests shot up 163 percent from December 2004 to June, Alcott said.

The confidentiality and immediate results of the nearly 4-year-old service are also integral in attracting more interested carpoolers, officials said. People enter data such as home, work and e-mail addresses and phone numbers, and they can be matched with someone in as little as one hour.

"The system we had before, people had to call us, we had to manually enter their data, we had to put it in an envelope, put it in the mail, and it took three to four

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days (to receive)," Alcott said, adding that a snail-mail system would prove disastrous if a bus strike occurred.

Don't like smokers? Want to drive or just hitch a ride? Aside from time, date and place, users can whittle down the list even further with additional preferences.

Su Labashosky, 65, of Phoenix, came across Sharetheride.com about a year ago after construction on the Piestewa Freeway plagued her daily commute to downtown Phoenix. She has had two carpool buddies over the past year and shaved five to 10 minutes off her drive.

"When I was working downtown, I noticed the same cars going at the same time, the same way I did - and all of them with one person in them," Labashosky said.

Despite increased carpooling interest, 88 percent of Valley workers and students reported driving solo at least once a week in 2005, according to a survey that WestGroup Research did for Valley Metro. That's down from 91 percent in 2004.

Meanwhile, people carpooling one or more days a week have held steady at 19 percent over the past two years, according to the survey.

"If I'm a person going to Phoenix and there's not a burden, I'm going to take my own car perhaps," Roc Arnett, chairman of the Citizen's Transportation Oversight Committee, said in addressing some solo drivers' mind-sets.

A carpool supporter, Arnett said transportation agencies must exert more effort in marketing the concept to people.

Muserelli, 37, of Glendale, who converted to carpooling in January, has another theory for why people like driving alone.

"One of the big reasons people don't (carpool) is they're afraid to give up that control," she said. "People just don't want to be without their vehicles."

State and county law requires employers with more than 50 workers at a single location to organize a trip-reduction program. Employers commonly offer incentives to workers, including prizes or subsidizing transportation costs, in exchange for alternative transportation use. About 1,200 Valley employers participate in trip reduction, Alcott said.

Soaring gas prices have also spurred more people to seriously consider carpooling, Alcott said. AAA Arizona says carpooling one day a week could reduce gas consumption as much as 20 percent.

Muserelli and Flannery trade driving duties each week; the agreement saves Muserelli \$70 to \$80 a month in gas and about \$50 for Flannery.

Cutting gas costs isn't the main motivation for Labashosky, who now carpools one or two days a week between north Phoenix and her job in Scottsdale.

"I just feel it's really important to cut down on the use of our natural resources and cut down on our pollution," she said.

Other major cities such as San Francisco offer ride-sharing sites similar to Valley Metro's, and several independent Web sites link people from all over the world.

Isabelle Boulard and Max Fox co-founded Carpoolworld.com, which matches carpoolers internationally for free. The site has registered more than 25,000 people since its debut in 2000, said Boulard, a Canada-based computer consultant.

Some officials warn that as the Valley's freeways grow more congested, the need for HOV lanes and carpoolers will subsequently increase. Three hundred miles of carpool lanes will be added over the next 20 years as part of Maricopa County's regional transportation plan.

"We haven't really felt the (traffic) pinch so much here, but the time will come,"

Arnett said.

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