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Monday, February 20, 2006

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Mass transit numbers up, but the idea of carpooling is alien to valley residents

BY ARNOLD M. KNIGHTLY
 BUSINESS PRESS

Las Vegas seem to love their cars. Judging by the increasing numbers, they love their mass transit system, too.

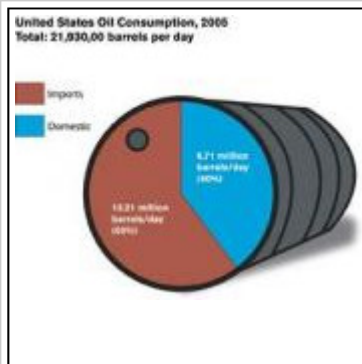
In 2005, more than 55 million passengers took advantage of the local Citizen Area Transit bus system. It is difficult to correlate that number to higher fuel prices because there has been an increase in ridership every year since the Regional Transportation Commission took over the valley's bus system.

Starting with 14.9 million riders in 1993, increases in ridership has always exceeded population growth, according to Sue Christiansen, public information administrator for the RTC. As fuel prices rise, are more of those lovers of the gas-guzzling, individual transport leaving their rides in the driveway for mass transit?

"It is really hard to tell if they are doing this because of fuel prices or because their car broke down," Christiansen said. "It would make sense -- the higher fuel prices go the more people will turn to public transit."

Christiansen admits that while that would make sense, any evidence the RTC has of higher gas prices being the cause for more riders is purely anecdotal.

The RTC watches the volatile oil market every year and tries to protect itself, and



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ultimately its customers, against fluctuating fuel costs. The commission buys fuel via a hedge fund during the annual budget meetings in May. With prices edging higher over the past few years, the commission ended up having to pay twice as much for fuel in 2005 than it did just two years ago.

SAVING MONEY

In 2005, the RTC used 5.8 million gallons of diesel and 922,000 gallons of compressed natural gas transporting citizens and tourists around the valley.

"We're still saving money," Christiansen said. "The price of oil going up definitely has affected the amount we are saving."

Ultra-low sulfur diesel is used in the 50 new double-decker Deuce and 30 60-foot buses, and low sulfur diesel is used in all other transports. The paratransports use the compressed natural gas.

The Metropolitan Area Express was introduced to the North Las Vegas Boulevard route 22 months ago as another way to combat fuel prices. Part of a federal test program, the 61-foot, 120-passenger vehicle runs on a diesel-electric hybrid propulsion engine.

The RTC raised rates on its 30-day pass to \$40 for first time in six years. The commission also charges \$2 on its Strip routes, compared with \$1.25 on other routes. The fares help pay for fuel costs, but they also go to improvements to the system -- more buses on the roads, higher frequency of carriages, turning an hourly route down to 30 minutes.

According to the RTC Web site, the commission currently has 365 vehicles on 51 routes throughout the valley.

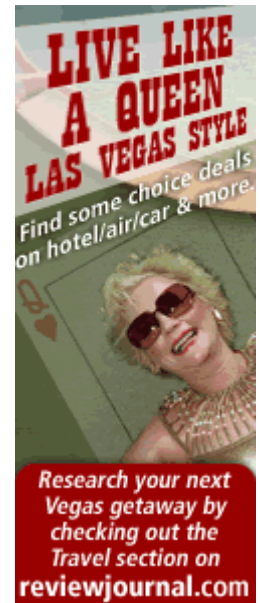
While it may be hard to judge whether or not rising fuel costs are causing an increase in bus ridership, it is easy to see that it is not driving people into carpooling in significant numbers. The RTC reports 15,000 area residents are currently registered in its "Club Ride" program. While members use a variety of mobility including walking, biking, and mass transit, carpooling is just one component.

SINGLE-OCCUPANCY VEHICLES

A casual glance at other cars during daily cross-town commutes during morning or evening rush hour can reveal the lack of importance that carpooling takes on in Las Vegas.

Inquiries to a half-dozen online services reveal that carpooling in Clark County is an afterthought. Max Fox, president of Datasphere Corporation, parent company of carpoolworld.com, says that his service only receives five to 10 travelers a month for all of Nevada.

"We have a lot more users of course in big cities like L.A. with lots of automobile commuters," Fox said via e-mail. "We're still waiting for the



other 99 percent of solo commuters out there to realize how many ways they can save, and how easy it is, to make use of those empty seats going back and forth on our roads."

One of the problems about enticing local commuters into sharing rides is, outside of helping the environment and saving a couple dollars, there is no real incentive to carpooling.

While there has been talk of developing high-occupancy vehicle lanes on U.S. Highway 95, nothing has really come to fruition. On Interstate 15, there is seemingly no room to widen the highway to install such carpool-rewarding expressways.

As anyone who has traveled Los Angeles' interstate system knows, being able to utilize the HOV lanes saves time and stress for its users.

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