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Sharing the ride -- and the gas bill

Public transportation and carpooling help workers save at the pump

BY DEBBIE SWARTZ • PRESS & SUN-BULLETIN • MAY 19, 2008

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With light, sweet crude oil hitting all-time highs of more than \$125 a barrel in May and relief not in sight, workers are looking for ways to take the sting out of the daily commute to work.

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Whether biking, carpooling or taking public transportation, workers in the Southern Tier and the rest of the United States are changing their methods of traveling to and from work.

From Maine to California, companies are encouraging employees to share rides. There are Web sites such as eRideShare.com and carpoolworld.com where people can search for others nearby who are interested in carpooling.

In some areas, such as Madison County near St. Louis, municipal government has encouraged residents and businesses to discover the benefits of carpooling and public transportation through its RideFinders.org Web site.

Although saving money at the gas pumps is important, there are other benefits to not riding alone, according to the site, including a reduction

in commute-related stress, traffic congestion and air pollution.

For those in Greater Binghamton, however, many have their sights set on significant savings at the pump.

Carpooling

As gas prices in Greater Binghamton began climbing several weeks ago, Binghamton University Continuing Education and Outreach Secretary Deborah Hulbert discussed carpooling with her daughter Tera Stanton. Both live in Deposit and were paying weekly up to \$70 each in gas to commute between work and home, Hulbert said.

"With gas fast approaching the \$4 mark, as commuters we are ... looking for alternative modes of transportation to cut down on costs," she said.

After nearly four weeks of carpooling, the savings are evident, Hulbert said.

"We cut our gas prices in half," she said.

Stanton, a senior accountant with Davidson Fox & Co. in Binghamton, carools with her mother a few times each week, depending on their schedules.

Prior to the beginning of each workweek, the two sit down and discuss which days their schedules allow them to carpool.

"It's a change in trying to adjust to each other's schedule," Stanton said. "It seems to be working out quite well."

Instead of picking each other up at their homes, on carpool days they meet at a specific spot where one parks their car for the day and rides with the other, Hulbert said.

For Hulbert, saving on gas is only one of the benefits carpooling allows.

"Carpooling saves me money, but the bonus is that I get to enjoy the company of my daughter on the way to and from work," Hulbert said. "We are very happy we did it."

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The daily commute from Diana Havens' home in Athens, Pa., to BU led her to change the way she gets to work.

She's working out a carpooling schedule with her niece Jayna McCutcheon, a manager for Bath & Body Works in the Shoppes at Vestal on the Vestal Parkway in Vestal.

Since McCutcheon has young children at home and often works a different schedule, both are trying to figure out solutions so they can carpool two or three times a week, Havens said.

"It's just a little bit of give and take both ways," she said.

Her \$250 monthly gas bill for commuting to work is getting out of hand and is expected to keep rising, Havens said.

"I just can't afford this," she said.

In addition to arranging carpooling, Havens said she's also looking into more fuel efficient transportation.

"Hopefully I'm going to get a motorcycle," she said.

Havens already has her permit and with some safety training she'll be ready to ride this summer, though the fix is only temporary.

"In the winter, this bike's not going to help me," Havens said.

Ideally, she said, she'd like to ride public transportation to and from work but has been unable to find a morning connection between Tioga County and Broome County.

"I would definitely do transit with the price of gas," Havens said.

Public transportation

In less rural areas, B.C. Transit has become a more popular provider for those looking for a less expensive way to commute to work, Broome County Department of Public Transportation Commissioner George Bagnetto said.

The number of riders has risen almost 6 percent from the nearly 3 million rides his department provided in 2007, he said.

"I think now we can safely say it's due to the skyrocketing prices of gas," Bagnetto said. "We're seeing more ridership, there's no doubt about it."

The increase will likely continue, he said, as gas prices at the pump continue to rise.

"It doesn't seem there's an end to the rising of gas prices," Bagnetto said.

The trend toward public transportation has been seen in Tioga County as well, said Shawn L. Yetter, the county's public transportation coordinator. The county has experienced a 26 percent increase in ridership on its routes since 2003, with much of the increase taking place in the last two to three years.

"I think there's definitely a correlation with the cost of fuel," Yetter said.

The largest increases are seen on two routes -- Waverly to Ithaca and Owego to Ithaca -- where many riders travel to Ithaca in the early morning, work all day and return home in the evening.

"Those routes are very popular," Yetter said.

The future of public transportation may look different as the county is conducting a survey of residents to see if changes in routes or frequency of routes would benefit the community. While the results of the survey have yet to be tallied, increased ridership is a good bet, Yetter said.

Tess Cornwell rides public transportation to and from work at Cornell University Monday through Friday, and has done so for five years. The cost savings is at least \$50 per week for the long trek between Owego and Ithaca, she said.

"I ride the bus because it saves gas and wear and tear on my car," Cornwell said. "It is a great way to meet people."

Ridership has increased over the years, she said, but never as much as it has lately.

"Before the price of gas went up the bus was half full in the summer months, but since the price of gas has gone out the roof, those people are riding the bus," Cornwell said. "I have seen a lot of new faces on the bus the last four months."

For a culture that has become comfortable with individuals driving themselves to work, people who have opted to carpool or ride public transportation are likely the first of many, Bagnetto said.

The increased costs will have many in the near future looking for alternative means of transportation, he said.

"We're getting to a point now," Bagnetto said, "where you're going to have to change your lifestyle."

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