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Into the pool

Ride sharing can save costs for commuter

By Shaun Sutner TELEGRAM & GAZETTE STAFF
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It is 5:45 on an unusually frigid late March morning.

The scene: the sprawling commuter parking lot at the Massachusetts Turnpike toll plaza in Millbury.

Vanpoolers and carpoolers are hurriedly parking their cars and hopping into one another's vehicles and peeling away in a brisk choreography of movement designed to waste as little time as possible.

As the pre-dawn darkness dissolves and a warming sun rises above the horizon, Carolyn Packard assumes her customary position behind the wheel of her van.

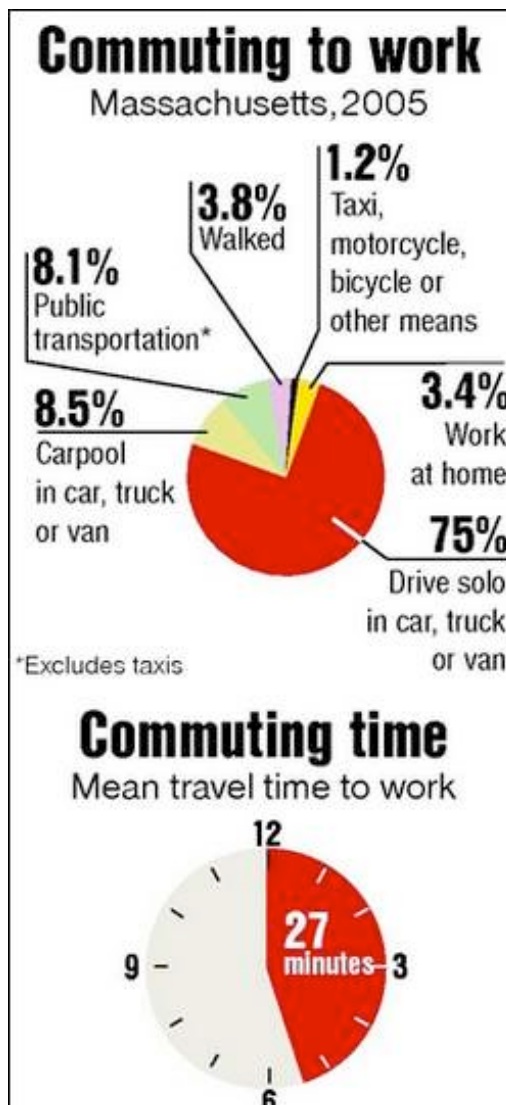
An experienced vanpooler, Ms. Packard has seen it all in the decade that she's been commuting to Boston — from four-hour traffic jams to the impatient driver who wouldn't stop for her even as she ran toward the van a minute or two behind schedule.

"It's so economical," said Ms. Packard, a compliance officer with the Massachusetts Commission Against Discrimination. "But I get plenty of road rage."

Apart from its peculiar discontents, vanpooling is cheap.

A vanpool operation from the Worcester area to Boston with a dozen reliable participants costs its riders no more than \$200 a month each, or between \$1,500 and \$2,400 a year.

Compare that to the at least \$10,000 that a typical solo driver pays for the same commute when all costs are factored in such as vehicle ownership, repair, insurance and depreciation, gas, tolls and parking in Boston, one of the five most expensive cities in the country in which to park. Commuter rail from Worcester, Westboro or Fitchburg to Boston, including parking at the commuter



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lot, runs about \$3,240 a year.

The state Executive Office of Transportation's MassRIDES program has a dozen vanpools operating in the Worcester area, with eight going from Worcester to Boston, two arriving in Shrewsbury from other regions and one each destined for Auburn and Marlboro.

The agency, which also matches carpoolers from a database of more than 5,000 commuters across the state, has linked up about 40 northern Worcester County commuters. Most travel to Boston, while seven carpools go to various UMass Memorial Health Care locations and a couple to Mount Wachusett Community College in Gardner.

The vans are owned by private companies and leased by riders on a monthly basis, with MassRIDES acting as a broker.

Kay Carson, the state agency's project manager for the 3-year-old commuter program, concedes that vanpooling is not for everybody.

"It's very low cost, but you need to have fairly regular hours and get out of work at 4," she said.

Among other catches are getting along with other people who may or may not like the same radio programs or conversation topics as you, waiting for late arrivals and emergencies that keep some vanpoolers at work after-hours.

MassRIDES has a contingency for special circumstances, though, offering four emergency rides home a year free of charge — usually by cab.

And while van- and carpools sound good, it is not always easy to find ride mates.

Louis E. Marcoccio, an information technology consultant who lives in Westboro, has been trying without success for two years to find someone to share his commute, either in his Mercedes sedan or late-model Suburban.

Mr. Marcoccio's 2005 posting on carpoolworld.com, one of a few Web sites that attempt to match commuters across the country, so far hasn't netted him a rider.

"It's very difficult. First of all, there's not that many forums for it, and the ones there are extremely limited," he said.

"Then, if you do get a few people, they're typically well out of the way or leave at considerably different times."

Source: U.S. Bureau of Transportation
T&G Staff/DON LANDGREN JR.

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Carolyn Packard drives a vanpool to Boston, where she works.
(T&G Staff/BETTY JENEWIN)

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One would-be vanpooler, Dennis Finn of Sturbridge, recently placed an ad in the Telegram & Gazette looking for riders to book a spot in his new van for \$35 a day roundtrip.

Not only did he not get any immediate takers, he also soon found out there were insurance implications he hadn't foreseen. Mr. Finn, a real estate agent in Boston, is now re-evaluating his plans, and is still commuting alone.

Meanwhile, the majority of commuters in Massachusetts, and every other state for that matter, still go it alone despite the dramatically higher expense and near certainty of traffic delays.

They go solo because they want to, argues Cliff Slater, who frequently bashes mass transit in his column in the Honolulu Advertiser newspaper.

People like driving alone because it is usually more convenient and they generally value their time at about 50 percent of their salary, Mr. Slater said. He also maintained that it is misleading to calculate vehicle ownership and operating costs at full value when people use their cars and SUVs for many purposes other than commuting.

"People don't like to walk or wait for a train or a bus," he said. "Most people need to own a car anyway, and the cost of commuting is just a marginal cost above the cost of ownership."

Don't tell that to the enthusiastic ridesharers at the Millbury Park & Ride lot.

For most of them, commuting is simply a matter of getting to the lot on time, then taking advantage of such money-saving benefits as a 10 percent discount on their auto insurance, and paying practically no tolls (for \$75 a year, van- and carpoolers get a Fast Lane transponder for their vehicle that allows unlimited trips on the turnpike).

"It beats riding the train," said James Kinderman, an insurance executive from Grafton, sitting at the wheel of his Toyota Highlander.

After a few minutes, Mr. Kinderman's two steady passengers pile in, and the SUV was off for Boston's Back Bay.

The group's monthly price per rider is \$250 — about the same as the train.

And, usually, faster.

Contact Shaun Sutner by e-mail at ssutner@telegram.com.



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