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## Carpooling? Nobody's doing it

BY JOSEPH RYAN

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At nearly 700 Chicago-area choke points, large blue signs call out to frustrated drivers: Share the Drive - 800-920-RIDE. They are the public face of the state's multimillion-dollar drive to get more commuters into carpools, and thus more cars off the road.

Yet, the carpooling system has been virtually abandoned by users. There is now about one rideshare user for every three of those blue signs.

"That is a real shame," says Joe DiJohn, director of the Metropolitan Transportation Support Initiative at the University of Illinois at Chicago. "That had a real potential for reducing congestion in a cost-efficient manner."

A U.S. Census analysis released Wednesday concludes carpooling is down nationwide, with Chicago ranked 34th out of large cities for its percentage of workers who partnered up to get back and forth in 2005.

Between 2000 and 2005 the number of carpools in Chicago and the suburbs has fallen noticeably even in the face of rising gas prices and longer commutes.

Fourteen percent of workers carpooled in Chicago in 2000. Just 10.7 percent did so in 2005, the latest available data.

In Elgin, 14 percent of workers carpooled in 2000 compared to 11 percent in 2005.

In Naperville, carpools were already few in 2000, accounting for just 4 percent of commuters. In 2005, the portion dropped from even that paltry figure to 3 percent.

Of the suburbs for which data is available, Aurora was the only one to see an increase, but the 2 percentage point bump was still well within the census' margin of error.

Reasons for the decline range from odd working hours and a stronger inclination toward privacy and personal time to the lack of carpool lanes on Chicago freeways.

"Everyone has their own tailor-made schedule and is reluctant to give it up," says Joe Schwieterman, director of the Chaddick Institute for Metropolitan Development at DePaul University. "We also have fewer large single-location employers ... which would make carpooling easier."

Broken program

One factor, too, could be the lack of a regional carpooling database that would help workers connect with each other.

State transportation experts foresaw the current decline in carpooling in the mid-1990s and speculated that failure of the ride-share program would exacerbate the situation, according to internal planning documents.

The ride-share program has declined despite a yearly budget for personnel and marketing of at least

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\$500,000. In 2004, the program was reportedly facilitating more than 1,100 carpool groups. Today it has just 200 registrants.

In the mid-1990s, state planners hoped to create between 2,000 and 4,000 carpool groups a year, documents show.

The program was shifted in 2006 from an obscure state planning agency, called the Chicago Area Transportation Study, to Pace after state transportation officials realized CATS didn't have the resources or background to administer it, said Pace spokeswoman Judi Kulm.

Still, in the last year, Pace has done little with it, instead waiting to match it up with a project that, for about \$100 a month, provides residents vans to make carpooling easier. Today, the Share the Drive's 800 number leads to an answering machine at Pace where you can leave an address to have more information mailed to you.

Kulm said Pace is waiting to get the proper software to help commuters connect online and over the 800 number for potential carpool hookups. The program may not be fully in place again until the end of the year.

"It is in a state of transition," Kulm said. "We want to do it right."

Down the road, Kulm said the agency is hoping to offer a reimbursement to carpoolers in the system to cover taxi, train or bus trips needed if the person has to leave work early for an emergency. That should jumpstart the program, DiJohn says.

"[Ride-share] was never really marketed properly or given the attention that it should have," he said. "It just amazes me why this region doesn't put more emphasis on ride sharing."

Interest up

With gas prices reaching all-time highs in the Chicago area, several privately run ride-share Web sites claim the interest in carpooling is up.

Ken Natzke is one of those wanting to save cash by riding with others.

The Bartlett man posted his request to join a carpool at [www.carpoolworld.com](http://www.carpoolworld.com) earlier this spring and so far has received three responses. Natzke is waiting to land a job before deciding on a commuting plan.

"I was just curious to see if anybody else was out there looking for a ride," he says. "I was quite shocked to see that people do look on (the Web site)."

At 49, Natzke has never considered himself the carpool type, but the recent gas price spike had him thinking a sacrifice of convenience might be worth the extra cash in his pocket.

"Your car was always your domain - that is how I grew up as a kid," he says. "I still do like my coffee and cigarettes in the morning, but I guess this is my way of making my little stand in the world."

Steve Shoemaker, executive director of [www.erideshare.com](http://www.erideshare.com), another ridesharing site, said carpoolers can save as much as \$3,000 a year on gas and car maintenance, depending on the length of commute.

Still, a search of corporate ride-sharing sites reveals a rather paltry sum of subscribers in the Chicago area, ranging from a few dozen to several hundred.

Kulm and other transportation experts argue a properly run state plan would be more effective because it could provide incentives, like emergency ride reimbursements, and fund a better marketing plan. Plus, state support gives the program legitimacy and makes users feel more secure.

"If (the private sector) was doing such a good job, why isn't carpooling on the increase?" says DiJohn.

Shoemaker is convinced that his company is just around the corner from a big boom in users. Erideshare.com has handled just 19,000 requests nationwide since 2005.

The looming oil crisis will soon make giving up one's independence to carpooling seem like an easy choice, he argues.

"I think times are going to be changing pretty soon," he says.

#### **Carpooling pros vs. cons**

##### **On the bright side**

- You save a ton in gas. If you carpool with just one person, that cuts your gas bill for commuting in half
- Cut those tolls in half, too
- Oil changes, brakes and tire rotations can all be done less often
- Some like the company

- Could help you socially at work

**On the dark side**

- Forget about always getting your lunch choice
- Can't run out to the store for a quick errand
- You won't be picking up dinner on the way home
- Some people can be grouchy in the morning

**Tips**

- Be flexible about your music choices
- Absolutely no smoking
- Best to switch off cars, instead of exchanging cash
- Get to know your potential car mates first

**Ready to carpool?**

The internet has a host of sites to help you find a carpool partner:

[www.sharethedrive.org](http://www.sharethedrive.org)

Pace is redesigning this site, which has just 200 members currently.

[www.rideboard.com](http://www.rideboard.com)

This site is more for one-time trips of long distances, such as travel to another state.

[www.carpoolconnect.com](http://www.carpoolconnect.com)

A recent search found 46 commuter postings between the northwest suburbs and Chicago.

[www.erideshare.com](http://www.erideshare.com)

Participants can search according to origination point, but postings are limited to a few a month.

[www.carpoolworld.com](http://www.carpoolworld.com)

This site has listings for several countries, and a few dozen postings in the suburbs.

[www.craigslist.org](http://www.craigslist.org)

The site that posts everything for free also can hook you up with a ride, but searching the system can be difficult.

Try a van:

Pace has a vanpool system that can cost about \$100 a month per person, which includes insurance, gas and car washes. Call (847) 228-2492 or visit [www.pacebus.com](http://www.pacebus.com) for more information.

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