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Nashville commuters use carpools, buses to save on fuel costs

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Amy Ferris was putting 500 miles a week on her van to commute from Lewisburg to her job at Ford Motor Credit in Franklin.

The drive was costing about \$200 a month — and that was two years ago. But she loved her home and didn't want to move.

"I was racking up the miles, putting a lot of wear and tear on my car," Ferris said. "And of course, then there were the gas payments. Gas hadn't even hit \$2 a gallon at that time."

She'd had enough. First, she bought a new, more economical car. Then she sent an e-mail to her co-workers: "Carpoolers wanted."

Ferris has been sharing the ride ever since. Each week she takes turns with two other women, Lesa Dawson and Pam Hicks, driving into Franklin.

With gas fast approaching the \$4 mark, many commuters are following suit, looking for alternative modes of transportation to cut down on costs.

Vanpools of 13 people have become more common, with few vacant seats available. Buses often have standing room only. Carpoolers are taking turns driving and splitting the cost of gas. Solo drivers are searching for ride-share buddies on the Internet.

The average price Friday for regular gasoline was \$3.54 a gallon in the Nashville area, compared with \$2.85 a year ago. David Penn, an economics professor at Middle Tennessee State University, said no one knows where it will end.

"Fuel prices are going to stay high for the foreseeable future," Penn said. "It's a pretty good bet it will be up for the next five years."

High prices are a tough reality for people who have long commutes.

"People have searched for housing that is more affordable — sometimes further out from their jobs," Penn said. "Until three or four years ago, there were relatively low prices for fuel. We adjusted to that and lived farther and farther from our jobs."

Ferris turned from a Chrysler Town and Country van to a Mercury Milan, a midsize sedan that gets 30 miles per gallon.

She said sharing the gas cost helps minimize the impact of her Lewisburg-to-Franklin commute, at a time when gas rates change by the hour.

"When I left for work gas was \$3.36. On the way home it had gone up to \$3.49," Ferris said. "I've heard it could go up to \$5. I don't know how people who make minimum wage afford it."

Public transit increases

Public transportation has seen an increase in riders, especially within the past year, said Debbie Henry, executive director of the Transportation Management Association Group in Franklin.

"We are seeing trends with the rising fuel prices and the awareness about air quality that show there is more demand for multiple modes of transportation," Henry said. "Folks have to get to work, but they need a very affordable way to get there."

Her organization helps run the vanpool program for the Regional Transit Authority's eight counties. The program has more than 100 vans that can carry 13-15 passengers who commute in the Nashville area.

The vans usually have no vacancies, and when spots do open up, they are quickly filled with people on a waiting list. The 20 new vans the RTA hopes to purchase using federal grant money are pretty much spoken for, Henry said.

Diane Thorne, executive director for the transit authority, said the vans are leased out to a group of at least eight people who pay about \$85 a month each. The fee covers the insurance, and RTA handles all the maintenance. The program is so popular, RTA does not advertise.

"It's all word of mouth," Thorne said.

Penn said the need for more public transportation has been fairly recent.

"There was no reason for government to plan for more public transportation as long as (fuel) prices were low because they didn't have the ridership," Penn said.

Murfreesboro resident Pam Burd likes that she gets to divvy up the cost of gas for the 45-minute commute 13 ways among her fellow vanpoolers.

"It's a great deal, there's no doubt about that," said Burd, whose husband drives the group's van from Murfreesboro to the Department of Veterans Affairs office in downtown Nashville every day. "Plus, you get to sit back and relax or socialize."

As an added bonus to her gas savings, the VA office gives free parking to the vanpool as well as to other carpools.

"It's a great incentive," Burd said.

Some get free bus ride

Some bus riders are also getting freebies. State workers and employees at Vanderbilt ride the bus free because of contracts between their employers and the transit authorities.

John Duncan, who works for the state Department of Commerce and Insurance in Nashville, gets a free ride to work from Hendersonville to Nashville because he is a state employee.

He estimates that by not driving his 8-cylinder truck every day he will save \$3,200 a year. Plus, he got to significantly lower the classification on his car insurance, to "drive to work under 5 miles," which saves him more.

Duncan started riding the bus six months ago after his wife had a kidney transplant and was forced to stop working. He takes RTA's Relax and Ride bus at 6:10 a.m. and by 6:50 a.m. he is in his office. He loves not having to battle traffic for 40 minutes on Interstate 65.

"It was an economic decision," Duncan said. "We have one income and a daughter in college. I was casting about for a way to save pennies, and in this case, I save dollars."

Nashville's Metropolitan Transit Authority buses are filling up, said Patricia Harris-Morehead, director of communications for the agency. By the end of June, MTA will reach the 9.4 million mark for number of passenger rides. Since 1997, MTA has seen a 27 percent increase in ridership.

"On some of our buses, during peak rush hours, there is standing room only, especially on our larger, busier routes such as Gallatin Road and Murfreesboro Road," Harris-Morehead said.

People change habits

Some commuters are still on the hunt for the best way to get to work. Craigslist and other message board sites are hubs for people, like Stephanie Dennis, who want to share a ride to cut gas costs. The more eye-catching the headline, the more responses a person gets.

"Save money! Reduce emissions! Share our commute!" is the fifth headline Dennis has posted to find a carpool buddy for the commute from Murfreesboro to Nashville. She's had one response. She has to fill up her Hyundai Sonata twice a week, at about \$50 a tank.

"I am posting notices, and trying to get the word out," she said. "I get pretty good gas mileage, and before the cost was negligible, but it's starting to make an impact."

With no end in sight to high gas prices, more people might have to change their habits for the long term, said Penn, the MTSU professor. That means living closer to work, buying more fuel-efficient cars and carpooling.

"Our entire way of life, our commuting patterns, where we live and work have been predicated on inexpensive transportation fuel," Penn said. "That may be coming to an end pretty dramatically and sharply."
