

Work isn't always flexible, but driving habits may be

Today's Topic: Can we change how we commute?



Traffic crawls along Hillsboro Pike in Green Hills. MANDY LUNN / THE TENNESSEAN / FILE

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Our View

The story of Nashville's congested roads is a familiar one. It is the story of sprawl.

"Sprawl" is an unpleasant-sounding word that makes people flinch. And while it does not describe all suburban living, it does point to a pressing problem for our environment.

Even as mainstream Americans are becoming aware of the need to reduce consumption of fossil fuels and clean up the air they breathe, they find themselves locked into lifestyles and work patterns that burn up gasoline and clog roads.

A U.S. Census Bureau report last week showed that the percentage of people driving alone to work increased between 2000 and 2005, to 77 percent, while the percentage who carpool dropped and the share who use public transportation stayed about the same.

In the Nashville area, 83 percent of workers were solo commuters in 2005, the bureau said, while 10 percent carpooled and less than 1 percent used public transportation.

That is a huge disparity. But there is no single, simple solution for a metropolitan area such as Nashville, where so many large employers have shift work (such as hospitals and factories), and real-estate costs push people with Nashville jobs to live in surrounding counties.

Plus, the freedom to hop into your car and go whenever and wherever is powerful for many people.

But at what point will the need for greater individual sacrifice kick in? That time, it seems, is now. With gas prices fluctuating, but at ever-higher levels, commuting has become a pocketbook matter as well as an environmental one. The options:

- Despite shortcomings, Nashville-area public transportation can work for some commuters. There is currently commuter-rail service only from Lebanon to Nashville and points between, but it is receiving good reviews, and could grow with a stronger marketing campaign. Only when it shows success is commuter rail likely to be extended in other directions from Nashville, as regional planners hope.

The Metro Transit Authority is certainly underused by those who live and work within Davidson County, and could itself benefit from a stronger campaign to get commuters to try it out.

- Given the limits of public transportation, car- and vanpooling are more immediate ways that commuters who live in communities outside Nashville can start to save and conserve. A number of Web sites offer ways for residents to find fellow carpoolers in their community. Sharing a ride with

only one other person can save more than \$1,500 a year on a 40-mile, round-trip commute. Carpooling with three people can double the savings.

Park and Ride sites around Nashville offer a way to save some fuel costs while easing downtown congestion.

- If you expect to drive to work regularly, consider trading your car or truck for one that gets higher mileage.
- And finally, it's time for everyone to look closely at their overall driving habits. Even if you're a shift worker and must drive to work alone, there are ways to consolidate errands and other driving trips.

There are so many reasons to cut down on our driving — clean air, fuel savings, public safety, time better spent — it would be better to evaluate our driving habits now than later, when our options may be fewer.

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