

FOREST LEAVES — Aug. 16, 2006

Gas too expensive? Try these options

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Raquel Eng swiped a plastic card in front of the windshield of a maroon Honda Element.

And with the doors then unlocked, she and her 4-year-old son, John, got in the car, pulled keys out of the glove box and left the public parking garage in downtown Evanston.

Eng, a technology support worker for an educational accreditation group, is one of a growing number of residents in Chicago and its suburbs to join I-Go Car Sharing, a non-profit company that allows people to share vehicles and their associated costs.

As fuel prices have escalated, many car drivers are putting on the brakes and looking for ways to save money on transportation.

I-go officials report that in July alone, 200 people signed up for the service, which offers cars at about 70 locations in Chicago, Evanston and Oak Park. Four years after it first started as a pilot program, nearly 3,000 are now signed up with I-go, and the organization is looking to expand further into suburban communities.

"I couldn't afford a car," said Eng, a single mother who recently moved here from the Washington, D.C. area.

Gas prices that are above \$3.30 per gallon at many suburban pumping stations are putting a major drag on family budgets.

Eng, who uses public transit for her daily commute, spends just about \$120 a month to have a car when she needs one. On the East Coast, Eng said she paid nearly \$500 to operate a car of her own.

Eng is one of many Americans finding ways to save on gas. According to a Pew Research Center survey released earlier this month, about 55 percent of Americans say they are cutting down on driving because of high gas prices.

About 58 percent say they've given serious thought to getting a car with better gas mileage the next time they buy or lease. Nearly 21 percent said they have started to car pool more often in response to the gas price spike, while 12 percent -- city dwellers more than suburbanites -- said they have started using mass transit more often.

Van pools

While overall ridership in Pace, the suburban bus division of the Regional Transportation Authority, has risen just about 2 percent over the last year, the agency is experiencing strong growth in its van pooling services.

"People are rethinking how they travel and they might be more open to (public transportation) than they were before," said Judy Kulm of Pace, adding that the van pooling option is a big hit with those who live in places not easily accommodated by the regional bus system.

From June 2005 to June 2006, usership in van pools -- typically groups of 5 to 12 people using a Pace-owned van to drive together from one neighborhood to work and back -- increased by 16 percent, said Kulm.

So far, 625 vans operate in Pace's six-county region, and 30 new vans are about to start.

The financial benefits of van pooling are clear: Four riders in a van pool that commutes 20 miles round-trip daily would pay Pace about \$90 a month, Kulm said, to cover all expenses, including insurance, gas and maintenance.

"You even get a car wash card," she said.

Drivers typically don't pay and also get 300 miles of driving credits for personal trips.

Metra reports that passenger trips on its 11 lines rose by nearly 4 percent, from 6.14 million trips in April 2005 to 6.36 million trips this April, although it won't attribute everything to higher gas prices. Some people are trying to save money on gasoline by taking their hike by bike. Chalen Hunter, a transportation specialist with the Northwest Municipal Conference, said her decision to take the bicycle to work as much as possible has been helped by another gasoline-saving move -- relocating about 1.5 miles away from her Des Plaines office.

"But even before I lived this close, I was still biking," she said. "I was tired of paying for gas."

The bike riding, which often consists of four trips per day because she likes to bike home and feed her dog, also meets much of her need for exercise, she said.

Cyd Curtis, who lives in Oak Park, frequently ventures out for an eight-mile or nine-mile bike ride to work in Chicago's South Loop. Curtis may have an unusual situation, in that her employer, the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency, makes bike commuting fairly easy by providing a locker room and fitness facility in the building's basement, and allowing bicycles to be parked in the building during the day. Still, some bicycle shop owners, such as Larry Binder of Al's Cycle Shop in Skokie, say the vast majority of riders appear to be recreational riders, not commuters.

"People are pretty religious around here with their cars," he said.

Curtis and Dan Korman of the Chicagoland Bicycle Federation both point out that those facing long commutes should investigate biking to public transit in order to cut gasoline costs.

Pace, Metra and the CTA all allow bikes on board, although not during peak usage hours.

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