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Brandy Baker / The Detroit News

Pam Horner and Dave Schweiger, who work in the McNamara Building in Detroit, laugh as they get ready for their ride home via the MichiVan program, in which passengers share fuel costs.

High cost of commuting

More Metro drivers dive into car pools

Fuel prices make the arranged rides a steal for commuters sick of sinking money into gas.

By Eric Lacy / The Detroit News

This summer's rising fuel costs have convinced more Metro Detroit commuters to share rides than ever before, putting economy over independence.

Applications for the Southeast Michigan Council of Government's car and van pool program are up this summer from 54 last year to 248, said Anita Blasius, a public outreach manager for the council, a regional planning agency.

"It indicates to me that people are wise enough to spend their money on other things than just gasoline," Blasius said.

The RideShare program serves commuters who live or work within seven southeast Michigan counties. It began about 25 years ago and consistently has had an active database of 3,000 motorists it believes pool daily, by car or

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van.

Membership for the car pool arm of the program is free. It matches people who then arrange their own car pools. RideShare partners with a group called MichiVan for vanpooling. MichiVan is a federally subsidized program that charges commuters a monthly fee.

MichiVan provides and maintains vans that can accommodate up to 15 passengers.

Passengers share the fuel costs.

Linda Hylenski, 50, of Ann Arbor joined the MichiVan program in April for her daily commute to downtown Detroit, where she clerks for a federal judge.

Hylenski gave up 5:30 a.m. workouts at the gym but expects to save several thousand dollars a year in parking and gas. Her MichiVan pool costs about \$80 a month.

"I have to get up earlier and get to work earlier, but I can unwind a little bit in the van on the way," she said.

The Southeast Michigan Council of Governments says at least 200,000 southeast Michigan commuters travel daily by car or van pool. If those residents didn't share rides, it would add at least 100,000 vehicles to the roads, Blasius said.

Janice Trimm, 55, of Southfield has been carpooling for at least 10 years. She's a regional manager for the secretary of state and travels to Lansing with colleagues, usually at least twice a week.

"You save money and the ride is shorter because you have people to talk to," Trimm said.

"If people can't see that now is a good time to carpool, with these high gas prices, then they probably never will."

Despite the increase in RideShare applications, the state recently cut funding for the car pool aspect of the program due to budget constraints.

The state still contributes to MichiVan and determines how federal dollars for car- and vanpooling are spent, said Jean Ruestman, supervisor of passenger transportation for the Michigan Department of Transportation.

A decline in government funding, mass transit and infrastructure improvements like car pool lanes on major interstates are some reasons why most Metro Detroit commuters are so reliant on driving their own car to and from work.

There's also the notion that Michigianians are extremely attached to their vehicles, Ruestman said.

"We're the car capital and are traditionally married to our cars," Ruestman said. "So getting people to switch to any forms of public transit has always been a challenge."

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