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▶ Latest Commuting r  
▶ Previous Story ▶ Ne

[Home Page](#)  
[Essentials](#)  
[CyberSurveys](#)  
[Forums](#)  
[Photo Galleries](#)  
[Weather](#)  
[Horoscope](#)  
[Lottery](#)  
[Giveaways](#)  
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[Advanced Search](#)  
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[Autos Insider](#)  
[Drive](#)  
[-- New Car](#)  
[Photos](#)  
[-- Car Reviews](#)  
[-- Latest Deals](#)  
[-- Model Reports](#)  
[Joyrides](#)  
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[Business](#)  
[Money & Life](#)  
[Careers](#)  
[-- Find a Job](#)  
[Real Estate](#)  
[-- Find a Home](#)

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[Metro/State](#)  
[Wayne](#)  
[Oakland](#)  
[Macomb](#)  
[Livingston](#)  
[Commuting](#)  
[Obituaries](#)  
[-- Death Notices](#)  
[Schools](#)  
[Special Reports](#)  
[Editorials](#)  
[Columnists](#)  
[Detroit History](#)  
**Nation/World**  
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[Politics/Gov](#)  
[Census](#)  
[Health](#)  
[Religion](#)  
[Technology](#)  
**Sports**  
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Morris Richardson II / The Detroit News

**Darrell Oliver, 42, keeps his blue Ram in the garage these days. He's riding to work with his fiancée in her Chrysler Sebring.**

## High cost of commuting

Soaring gas prices force drivers to change habits

By Francis X. Donnelly / The Detroit News

Darrell Oliver of Detroit fears his local gas station. Richard Rosenbaum of Bloomfield Township pays no heed to his.

Oliver, who drives a Dodge Ram 1500 truck, paid \$500 last month for gas, which was more than his monthly auto payment.

Rosenbaum, who owns a Toyota Prius, a hybrid gas-electric car, sometimes goes more than a month without having to refuel.

One of the truths of the Runaway Gas Prices of 2005 is that not all commuters suffer equally. In fact, some aren't suffering at all.

"I try to get every mile out of it," said Rosenbaum, 69. "If I could get 60 or 70 miles, I would."

Alas, the vehicles of Metro Detroit motorists tend to look more like Oliver's hulking pickup than Rosenbaum's snub-nosed hybrid.

With gas prices as their kryptonite, the once-mighty SUVs and monster trucks that have ruled the birthplace of the automobile for the past decade are gradually being curbed.



Morris Richardson II / The Detr

**Richard Rosenbaum, who owns a Toyota Prius, a hybrid gas-electric car, sometimes goes more than a month without having to refuel. "My displeasure is that not every car is like this," he says.**

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Owners of the behemoths are taking fewer and shorter trips, being stingy when fueling them and thinking the once unthinkable -- trading them in for something smaller. Oliver, 42, has put the blue Ram out to pasture.

It sits in his garage as he rides to work with his fiancée in her Chrysler Sebring.

"Do you really have to ask?" the Chrysler stamping plant worker said when asked how he felt about the soaring gas prices. "I think it's ridiculous."

As the price of gas begins to flirt with \$3 a gallon, more people will consider changing how and what they drive, an auto expert said.

Philip Reed, senior consumer advice editor for Edmunds.com, an auto information Web site, said motorists may buy a cheaper grade of gas, change their air filters more often and monitor their tire pressure to boost fuel economy.

One thing they won't do is drive less aggressively, which is one of the best ways to improve mileage, Reed said.

"They're like smokers," he said. "They think they can't quit their habit."

One favorite gambit is to try to wait out the high prices, hoping they'll drop. But they usually move in only one direction -- up.

This week has been kinder as the price has dropped 3 cents since Monday. The average cost of a gallon of self-serve unleaded gas in Michigan on Wednesday was \$2.67, according to AAA Michigan.

## Families search for cheap gas

Lynn Anderson of Clinton Township has discovered the joy of Costco, whose gas prices run 10 cents cheaper than some service stations.

The problem is that her neighbors have discovered the discount wholesaler as well.

"The lines are getting long," said the mother of two teens. "We're doing what we can to beat everyone else. Everyone has to try to find the angles."

Anderson, 48, drives a 2005 VW Passat wagon, whose 27 miles per gallon falls between the Ram's 13 mpg and the Prius' 53.

The homemaker said the impact of the growing expense has started to leak into other parts of life. She's putting off her 16-year-old's quest for a car. Family dinners consist of two ingredients: macaroni and cheese.

"Isn't it horrible?" she asked. "It's obscene."

Bill and Beverly Hagerman also are feeling gas pain.

The Waterford couple own two Chevrolets, a 2003 Impala sedan and a 2004 Silverado truck. Guess which one is tethered to the garage these days.

Beverly Hagerman, 58, only lives one mile from her job as a support specialist for circuit court but she carpools anyway. Her husband drops her off and takes the Impala to a Chevy dealership where he ferries autos around the lot.

"For some people, it's almost to the point where they have to choose between gas or food," she said. "When do you begin to consider gas a necessity?"

One recent morning, the couple drove past a service station where gas was selling for -- cheap -- \$2.59 a gallon. On their way home in the afternoon, the price had jumped to -- cha-ching, cheap -- \$2.70.

Cheryl Steinhurst of Shelby Township has two gas guzzlers at home: a Dodge Durango SUV

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Max Ortiz / The Detroit News

**Lynn Anderson of Clinton Township with her kids Paul and Laura, fills her VW Passat station wagon at Costco, where gas costs 10 cents cheaper than some service stations.**

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a Dodge Ram 1500 truck.

Like two thirsty Goliaths, the vehicles are siphoning away her mad money.

As a result, she's taking fewer weekend trips this year and, as much as she loves her oversized autos, is thinking about buying something smaller next time.

"Whaddya think?" said the Best Western corporate sales manager. "We'll have to do it because that's just terrible."

Edmunds.com has tested cars to see if there's any validity to common beliefs of how to improve gas mileage. It found that running the air conditioner doesn't hurt mileage and that cruise control improved the mileage of a sports car 4.5 percent and an SUV by 14 percent.

The biggest difference was found in aggressive driving. Moderate driving improved the mileage of the sports car by 27 percent and the SUV by 35 percent.

"Of the spectrum of things people can do, the first is to change their driving habits," said R. Edmunds.com editor.

## Hybrids rule the road

With all the pocketbook troubles of the minivans and SUVs, the new king of the road is an awkward-looking vehicle that's half their weight and just 14 feet long.

The Prius can go 600 miles on a tankful of gas. It's a green car that makes drivers of its big brethren green with envy.

But Rosenbaum, the Prius owner from Bloomfield Township, doesn't gloat about his good fortune.

"My displeasure is that not every car is like this," he said.

Rosenbaum, who describes himself as a compulsive record-keeper, religiously tracks his mileage.

He read the numbers from several gas refuelings during a roundabout trek to Chicago with his grandson:

"August 17th: 54 miles per gallon. The 21st: 52.5 miles per gallon. The 22nd: 57.3. That's the best so far."

Still, it's not enough. He tries to wring even more miles from the white hybrid by coasting on hills.

He said he's heard about another Prius owner who gets 80 miles per gallon by driving around with 18 auxiliary batteries in his trunk.

To drive, perchance to dream.

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