

TRIBUNE-REVIEW

Into the pool

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Rare are the people who are able to commute from their home to their business and stay within the borders of the same town.

Suburbanites quickly find that they need to commute somewhere else for their jobs. But those commutes are taxing on patience and pocketbooks.

With the price of gasoline soaring, more and more people are trying alternate ways to work in the morning. But if someone you work with doesn't live near you (which is often the case when you work in downtown Pittsburgh) and you don't know anyone near by who is going the same way at around the same time, how can you carpool?

With that in mind, the Southwestern Pennsylvania Commission began a program called CommuteInfo. Started in the early 1970s, it provides information on mass-transit systems and links people looking to share rides via carpools and vanpools through the 10-county region of Allegheny, Armstrong, Beaver, Butler, Fayette, Greene, Indiana, Lawrence, Washington and Westmoreland counties.

"There are 200 carpools registered and 35 vanpools registered," said Lisa Kay Schweyer, program developer for the Southwestern Pennsylvania Commission, noting more than 400 people are registered in each category.

"And those are only the ones that are registered. Once people make the connections, they don't always tell us what they end up doing. We even have people who are looking to bikepool and just want to do the trip with someone."

After completing an online survey or calling and completing one over the phone, interested commuters are given information on potential matches. Schweyer offers a list of suggested questions to ask before beginning a carpool with someone.

People can begin carpooling immediately and, if things aren't working out, can stop the next day. Generally people who vanpool commit from month to month, but after contributing their share they are free to leave the pool as well.

Perhaps one of the best aspects of the program is that registered carpool and vanpool participants are eligible for an emergency ride home, up to four times a year. So if the person you're riding with has a family emergency or goes home sick and you're stranded, you can use the service to arrange to get home that night. Participants can save their receipts and be reimbursed for up to \$100 a

year, which is a nice bonus for being part of the program, Schweyer said.

Vanpooling is unique in that the vans are leased through a third-party provider. The provider has either nine- or 15-passenger vans customized with reading lamps and cup holders. The group shares the cost for gas, parking fees and ensuring the vehicles are properly maintained. The provider is responsible for covering maintenance fees and liability insurance and provides an emergency back-up vehicle should a group's regular van be out of commission. Drivers are periodically offered safety seminars and carpooling etiquette guidelines.

Todd Brinton, of Greensburg, has been using vanpool for about five years. He rides from Greensburg to downtown Pittsburgh in a vanpool with a dozen other people, four of whom work with him.

"When I first joined the vanpool, parking was \$8 a day Downtown, which should tell you how much I'm saving now," he said. "The best advice I can offer people is to be flexible, especially with times you're willing to leave for work and come home again. The hardest thing is getting the scheduling right, but if you're willing to adjust your times by 15 minutes or even 30 minutes, it's well worth it. Plus, you have to allow yourself extra time with traffic and to get to your job once you park."

Michelle Bergman, of Irwin, joined a vanpool with her mother after landing a job at the University of Pittsburgh 13 years ago. Her mother, Billie Bergman, also of Irwin, had been using the program for far longer, though. Michelle serves as the primary driver for the vanpool that carries 11 people from Irwin to Oakland each day.

"The best thing about the vanpool is not having to worry about parking every day," Michelle Bergman said. "That and also the wear and tear on our vehicle and it's more cost-effective."

"People are looking for an alternative (to driving every day) and to save money," Schweyer said. "There are some people in the program who literally couldn't afford to work unless they found an alternative to driving their own cars to work every day."

Schweyer herself uses mass transit to get to her job in Pittsburgh from North Huntingdon Township.

"I did not know all the commuting options available to regional commuters before starting in this position, even though I had even been a long-distance commuter for many years," she said. "I was happy to learn that there was a convenient transit option available to me, and I am really enjoying letting someone else handle the driving."

Brinton said he'd wished he'd known about the CommuteInfo program earlier, too. After commuting into Pittsburgh from Greensburg for five years, he first heard about the program through coworkers at Highmark.

"After I'd seen all the ads on the sides of vans and the signs on the road, I finally decided to call the phone number and join," he said.

"The best advice I can offer someone is to give it a try," Bergman said. "Even if you're not sure it's something you want to do, try it and see."

"What I'd like to stress is that as long as one leg of your commute goes through that 10-county region, then you qualify for the program," Schweyer said, noting that the program saw a 57 percent increase in information requests during the 2004-05 fiscal year.

"For example, we have one person who lives in Johnstown, but is eligible for the program because he works in Allegheny County. We also have people who vanpool to Wheeling, W.Va. It could even be something as close as going from North Huntingdon to Delmont or Latrobe to Washington -- the trips can be any length as long as they go through the 10-county region."

Schweyer said a number of people who work swing shifts applied for different travel times and she was amazed that they managed to find matches. Even people who go to school full time or for postgraduate work are finding people to share the commute.

The program is completely free to participants. Schweyer said CommuteInfo passes the information along about existing vanpools, carpools and bike pools, so making specific arrangements for commuting is up to the parties involved.

"Some people will say that they are driving anyway and that someone can come along with them, while other people have it down to the penny how much it costs to carpool," Schweyer said.

CommuteInfo is operated in partnership with transportation management associations, transportation providers, businesses and nonprofit service organizations throughout Southwestern Pennsylvania. The CommuteInfo program serves as an information clearinghouse for commuters and employers.

In 2004, the CommuteInfo program was awarded for the Association of Commuter Transportation Renovation Award and the Smart Growth Partnership of Westmoreland Certificate of Merit. The Certificate of Merit recognized the program's work in providing commuting alternatives and encouraging community and stakeholder collaboration in development decisions.

Interested commuters can visit CommuteInfo's Web site at www.commuteinfo.org, or call its toll-free number 888-819-6110 to complete a commuter profile that is added to a database.