

TRIBUNE-REVIEW

Commuter program brings carpoolers together

By Noele Creamer
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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.

People who live in the suburbs quickly find that they need to commute somewhere else for their jobs. But those commutes are taxing on workers' patience and pocketbooks.

With the high price of gasoline, it's no wonder that more and more people are trying to find other ways to work in the morning.

One of those ways is carpooling, 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 nearby you who is going the same way at around the same time, how are you going to carpool?

With that in mind, the Southwestern Pennsylvania Commission began a program called CommuteInfo.

The program, which was started in the early 1970s, provides information on mass transit systems and links people looking to share rides via carpools and vanpools throughout 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 there are more than 400 people 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 bike pool 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 don't work out, they can stop the next day. Generally, people who vanpool commit from month to month, but after contributing their share, they are free to leave that 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 that are 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.

Jody Burtner, of Latrobe, has been the primary driver for 10 years of a vanpool that begins in Greensburg and goes to downtown Pittsburgh each day. After living in Philadelphia and becoming accustomed to that mass-transit system, Burtner said this was the best solution for her after moving back to the area.

"There are 13 people in our van right now, and about five of us have been a core group for a long time," she said. "Since you're spending upwards of two-and-a-half to three hours with these people every day, you sometimes see them more than your own family. We've even started calling each other our 'van family.'"

While being the primary van driver means that the van is leased in her name and she is responsible for the extra paperwork and collecting each vanpooler's share to ensure the budgeting all works out, Burtner said it is well worth it in the end.

"The absolute money savings makes it worth it," she said. "Our shared rate is \$165 a month. You can't even park for that much every day in Pittsburgh."

"People are looking for an alternative (to driving every day) and to save money," Schweyer said. "You save money in gas, on parking and wear and tear on your vehicles by carpooling or vanpooling. 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."

Deena Wells and Danielle Marks, both of Latrobe, ride the same vanpool that goes from Latrobe to downtown Pittsburgh every morning.

Wells, who has been a part of the vanpool for 12 years, said she originally found out about the program through her cousin, who used to be part of the same group.

"With the price of gas, parking, tires, oil changes and the whole range of wear and tear on driving a car, there is a significant savings with my monthly contribution (to the vanpool)," Wells said. "Over the years people come and go with their jobs changing, but this is an economical solution."

Marks, who has belonged to the vanpool for nine years, said that even though she is one of the van's drivers, it's nice to get a break from having to deal with the traffic every day.

"It's nice because when you're riding, you can read or nap or catch up on work you didn't get a chance to finish before," she said.

With transitions in jobs and seeing people in their vanpool come and go, the group currently has 11 people in its 15-passenger van.

"We're always looking for more people to come with us because then all of our monthly contributions go down," Marks said.

"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 have applied for their different travel times and even she was amazed that matches were found for them. Even people who go to school full time or for postgraduate work are finding people to make the commute.

The program is completely free to participants. Schweyer said CommuteInfo passes along the information about vanpools, carpools and bike pools. Making the 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 is designed to serve as an information clearinghouse for commuters and employers. In 2004, the CommuteInfo program received 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 collaboration in development decisions.

Interested commuters can visit CommuteInfo's Web site at www.commuteinfo.org or call 888-819-6110 to complete a commuter profile.

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