

VANPOOLING

Come along for the ride with those who leave the driving to others

By Zandy Dudiak

Staff writer

Eric Cliff weaves through lanes of rush hour traffic with the skill of a bus driver in the know about the flow.

Cliff, a Ligonier resident, is a transit driver of sorts, except his vehicle is a 15-passenger ridesharing van. His real job is with Relizoo downtown.

During rush hour, though, he's taken on the duties of primary driver for the van. His co-pilot, occupying the passenger seat, is Al Deresh of Crabtree, one of the van's three backup drivers.

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"We know all the detours," Deresh says.

Like Cliff and Deresh, their fellow passengers have chosen to leave their own vehicles behind in Westmoreland County and share the commute to their respective jobs in downtown Pittsburgh.

Their van is one of 42 coordinated through CommuteInfo, a program of the Southwest Pennsylvania Commission that provides ridesharing matches for motorists interested in alternatives to driving to work alone.

No special license is required for the drivers and the van is automatic. The seating is more comfortable than a bus, another incentive for riders.

This particular van makes two stops — the first at the Wal-Mart in Hempfield Township, the second down Route 30 near the Turnpike interchange in North Huntingdon. At present, this van has 11 full-time commuters and one part-time.

The driver is a volunteer from within the vanpool. Drivers must undergo driver and credit checks (because they handle the riders' payments) but get to ride for free.

This isn't the only vanpool coming through Westmoreland County down the Route 30 corridor. There are actually seven vans from the Greensburg/Irwin/Latrobe area and one from Murrysville/Monroeville that go into downtown each day.

There are also vans from Monroeville, North Huntingdon/Irwin, White Oak/McKeesport, Penn Hills and Penn Township that head into Oakland daily.

Many of the riders who board Cliff's



BOARDING FOR the ride home are (from left) Janet Woody and Kim Mayer of North Huntingdon, Al Deresh of Crabtree and Mark D'Amico of Norvelt.

Photo by Zandy Dudiak

van each day sleep their way into work on the ride, which generally is under an hour. Most of them are a bit more lively on the way home, chatting about the work day and their families.

"Each van has its own personality," says Lisa Kay Schweyer, CommuteInfo program developer. "You do create a little community."

For the most part, the riders can choose to sit where they like. But like a school bus, the seating becomes sort of self-assigned over time.

The van leaves Wal-Mart at 6:10 each morning, picking up riders at Nations Rent in North Huntingdon about 6:20. The van arrives in Pittsburgh by 6:55 a.m.

Outbound, the van leaves from a location near Mellon Arena at 4:10 p.m., arriving in North Huntingdon about 4:55 p.m.

"It's the Maglev," jokes Mark D'Amico of Norvelt.

What about on days when the power's out at home or the boss needs something last minute at quitting time?

"The rule is you're late as soon as the van pulls out," says Janet Woody, a rider from North Huntingdon.

"It depends how well you're liked," says D'Amico with a smile, remembering the time the van waited a half hour for someone stuck after work.

Another time, they drove Woody home after she lost her car keys.

Riders pay a month in advance to reserve a seat, regardless of sick or vacation days. The cost includes the amount to lease the van from a third-party provider arranged through CommuteInfo, gasoline, tolls and parking and varies van to van.

Some employers allow vans to park for free. Currently, rider Heather Monteparte of Greensburg is able to park the van at her place of employment, saving parking costs for the vanpool.

Schweyer says some companies provide payroll deduction for the vanpool payments — and in some cases the money is taken out pre-tax as an incentive to use mass transit.

There is also an incentive to fill the van because the more riders, the less the cost.

Breakdowns are few. According to the riders, there's been a flat tire and one time a windshield wiper broke.

Rider Bill Broker of Penn fixed it — "in the rain," he notes with a chuckle.

The reasons these riders have chosen vanpooling vary. A few said they would not have taken a job in downtown Pittsburgh had it not been for the vanpool.

"Economic reasons," says Cliff, who has been vanpooling for three years. "The cost, gas, parking, wear and tear on the car."

For Deresh, it cuts down on his "stress" and insurance costs.

"I think it's more relaxing, not as many stops, a nicer commute," says Monteparte.

Ada Rummel of Mt. Pleasant began riding the van three years ago at the urging of Woody, who works a few floors away from her in the United States Steel Building.

Kim Mayer of North Huntingdon has been riding in a vanpool off and on for 20 years.

"I hate to drive," she says. Mayer recalls her fellow riders in another vanpool had a baby shower for her — and this van had a pizza party recently when someone was leaving.

"It's a nice group," she says.