

VANPOOLING



WAITING FOR their van to arrive at the designated meeting place are ridesharers Mark D'Amico, Al Deresh, Dave Atkins, Ada Rummel, Janet Woody, Josephine Kenny, Bill Broker and Eric Cliff.



ERIC CLIFF, the designated driver, negotiates the lanes of rush-hour traffic along the Parkway East near George Westinghouse Technology Park in Churchill.

Photos by Zandy Dudiak

FYI

More ways to get to work than driving automobile

By Zandy Dudiak

Staff writer

A car isn't the only way to get to work.

Buses, vanpools, bicycles and two feet walking take more than 50 percent of downtown Pittsburgh employees to work, according to a study by the Pittsburgh Downtown Partnership. Nine percent of commuters haven't given up cars, but choose to carpool.

Providing commuters with information on these choices is one of the functions of the Southwestern Pennsylvania Commission, which is involved in regional transportation planning. With areas outside Pittsburgh developing rapidly, the commission has been looking at the regional transportation picture for 10 southwestern Pennsylvania counties.

CommuterInfo, one of the commission's programs, has been sponsoring ridesharing for more than 30 years — since people began looking at trans-

portation alternatives during the OPEC oil crisis of the early 1970s.

"What people like about vanpools is they are very comfortable," says Lisa Kay Schweyer, CommuterInfo program developer. "It helps people feel less frustrated because some are stressed when they have to drive themselves."

Riders like the fact they can leave books or other possessions on the van. Also, because the lease company takes care of van maintenance, the responsibilities of the riders are minimal.

Based on the American Automobile Association estimate that it costs 52 cents a mile to drive a car — including gas, oil, maintenance, tires and depreciation — the annual cost of commuting 30 miles round trip a day would cost \$3,931. Schweyer points out that does not include the cost of parking and tolls.

In comparison, the average vanpool rider pays \$70 to \$110 a month, plus the shared cost of gasoline, Schweyer says. Currently, more than 600 passengers

ride in some 40 vanpools that service areas all around the city.

Only seven to 15 commuters are needed to start a vanpool. Riders who volunteer to serve as the primary driver get to ride for free.

The program provides a free regional ridesharing match service for motorists interested in alternatives to driving to work alone.

Those interested can fill out a commuter profile online at www.CommuterInfo.org or call toll-free 1-888-819-6110. The form takes only about five minutes to complete.

Meg Kessler, ridesharing coordinator for CommuterInfo, says special software matches commuters with transit and ridesharing options. Those interested are urged to talk to existing van riders.

"The vans take on unique personalities," says Kessler.

For instance, some are noisy and some play country music, Kessler says. On an hour or so commute, that might

irritate potential ridesharers.

CommuterInfo's goal is to have downtown workers use ridesharing at least twice a week.

The commission partners with a number of agencies, including regional transit operators such as Port Authority and Westmoreland Transit, University of Pittsburgh's Pitt Ridesharing and a vanpool lease provider.

The commission is hoping more people take an interest in vanpooling, which currently accounts for only 0.7 percent of commuters. Vanpools work best for those with standard work hours.

Something interesting has been happening as more commuters are working in suburban settings such as Southpointe or the Cranberry/Warren/Allegheny area.

"As this program is becoming more and more known in the region, I'm getting calls for reverse commuting," says Kessler, meaning that those closer to the city are looking for ridesharing options to outlying areas.

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