



## Rhode Island news

# As fuel costs rise, more people opt to share a ride

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Amanda Raiche, of West Warwick, is the driver for the carpool she shares with her mother, Sharon, in back at right, and her mother's best friend, Linda Plante. They drive from West Warwick to their jobs in Providence. The Providence Journal / Steve Szydlowski

ROUTE 95 Peering out the passenger seat window of a three-person carpool, Sharon Raiche scans the morning rush-hour traffic and observes one of the great ironies of the current energy crisis.

The cars, pickup trucks and SUVs that crowd the highway for the daily ritual almost all have a single passenger — the driver. Even with gasoline prices at near-record levels, the vast majority of Americans drive to work, and they drive alone.

"Nobody carpools," says Raiche as she looks cars with only one occupant headed north toward Providence.

Well, almost nobody.

Nationally, about 10.7 percent of workers 16 and older carpooled to work in 2006, according to the most

recent statistics available from the U.S. Census Bureau. That's down considerably from the peak of about 20 percent in 1980.

In Rhode Island, according to the Census Bureau, only 8.9 percent of workers carpooled to work in 2006, putting Rhode Island 45th among all states. With about 768,000 Rhode Islanders in the work force, that means about 68,000 shared rides to work, according to calculations based on Census Bureau data.

Carpooling became popular during the energy crisis of the late 1970s and early 1980s. But its popularity waned when gasoline prices dropped, and people could afford the luxury of driving alone. For years, gasoline prices defied inflation. The decline bottomed out at the end of 2001, when the average price in Rhode Island was just \$1.129 a gallon.

"There's a value — perceived and real — in having that flexibility and independence to drive your own car, to play whatever music you want, to come and go as you want," said Kurt Teichert, a lecturer in environmental studies at Brown University.

But now, there is anecdotal evidence suggesting a renewed interest in carpooling, mainly because of the recent steep rise in fuel prices. For the first time since 1991, the amount of gasoline consumed in the United States has declined.

People are driving significantly fewer miles this year compared with last year, according to a report released Monday by the U.S. Department of Transportation. The number of vehicle miles traveled fell by 3.7 percent in May, compared with the same month last year, the report said. The decline was even more dramatic in Rhode Island. Motorists here drove 5.4 percent fewer miles in May.

Monday, the average price of regular, self-serve gasoline was \$3.949 a gallon, down 9 cents from last week, according to the state's Office of Energy Resources. That was the first time gasoline dropped below \$4 a gallon since late May. The average price is now down 16 cents from the all-time high of \$4.109 a gallon, set two weeks ago.

Home heating oil fell 17 cents to \$4.419 a gallon, according to the Office of Energy Resources.

People have had formal arrangements to share rides to work in the United States for at least 50 years. The U.S. government promoted the practice during World War II as a way to save gasoline and help the U.S. war effort. It printed a poster that said "When you ride ALONE you ride with Hitler! Join a Car-Sharing club TODAY!"

Sharon Raiche about two years ago began carpooling with her daughter, Amanda Raiche, as a way to save gas money. Last September, Sharon's best friend, Linda Plante, joined the carpool. All are from West Warwick.

Amanda usually drives the trio to downtown Providence, dropping off Plante at Dorrance Street Financial, where she is an administrative assistant; and her mother at the Rhode Island Supreme Court building, where she pays the court's bills and oversees contracts with outside vendors. Amanda Raiche works for the secretary of state's First Stop Business Information Center.

One recent morning in Amanda's spotless 2008 Honda Accord, there is some friendly teasing between

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mother and daughter about hot flashes and menopause, while Plante sits in the back seat and just smiles.

Amanda complains that her dad eats the leftovers she leaves in the refrigerator.

“You have to put a sign on it: do not eat her calzone,” Sharon advises. Amanda says she’s trying to save money by eating leftovers. Sharon offers her approval: “Life is about leftovers.”

In an interview, Amanda said that she usually pays for the gas and drives her car in return for living at home rent-free.

For those who don’t know their carpool partners as well, the conversations may not be so relaxed. And there could be other worries.

What if your carpool partner wants to talk all the time, while you just want to zone out? What if she is always late? What if he smells bad? What if she is always gabbing on her cell phone? What if he is dangerous?

Nicole Roussell, 24, a marketing assistant at Rhode Island Monthly magazine, had some of those concerns.

She posted a note in June on Craigslist.org saying she was looking for someone to carpool with from New Bedford to Providence.

When an older man responded to her ad, she said she took some safety precautions when he picked her up the first time.

“I brought a pocket knife with me,” she said.

“I don’t know what I would do with it,” she said. “I really wanted to get ahold of some Mace,” but didn’t know where to buy it.

It turned out that neither was necessary. “He ended up being a really, really nice guy.”

The nice guy was Bob Lovinger, who works for Lifespan as a senior grant development officer. He and Roussell carpoled a couple of times. But Lovinger said that coordinating work schedules was too restrictive for him. He wasn’t able to stop at the gym on his way home from work anymore.

He also found that sitting next to a stranger in a car can be awkward, he said. “You have to make an effort to make conversation, or you have to become quickly comfortable with silence.”

“Silence,” he said, “is more of a presence when you’re with complete strangers.”

Teichert, the Brown lecturer, has been carpooling from Cape Cod for the past 14 years. He said the issues of schedules, taste in music, and rules about eating in the car can be easily worked out.

“If someone’s schedule changes, or something like that, as long as you talk to the other folks and you have some backup plans, it can work out very well.”

“Just like any other endeavor of people working together, communication is the key,” he said. “You have to anticipate complexity and then just communicate about it.”

There have been times when communication failed and some members of his carpool ended up waiting for someone who was not riding that day. And there have been times when someone has been left behind.

Carpooling advocates often cite many benefits of ride sharing, and at the top of the list is often the savings.

Those savings can be significant. For example, if two people share a roundtrip ride between North Kingstown and Providence every work day — a 22.7-mile commute each way — they would each save \$1,076 a year in gasoline costs at the current average price over the cost of commuting alone. That’s a savings of 50 percent.

Even those who commute less can still save. Two people who share a 5.7-mile commute from Pawtucket to Providence could each save \$270 a year in gasoline costs.

If you consider the other expenses related to owning a car, such as insurance, depreciation and taxes, the payoff is bigger. “Over the years, carpooling has allowed me to own and operate fewer vehicles, and that’s where the real savings are if you avoid the total cost of ownership,” said Teichert, the Brown lecturer.

For some carpoolers, there’s also a benefit in the companionship. Karen Matteson, of Coventry, and Kathy Tobin-Henry, of West Warwick, began commuting last fall to Citizens Bank in Warwick, where they both work.

They limit discussions about work to positive things, Tobin-Henry said in an interview. And they talk about their families, movies and vacation plans.

“We’re pretty easygoing,” Matteson said. “It’s no different than having a family member in the car with you. Actually, it’s probably more enjoyable.”

To find carpooling resources, go to:

[www.ripta.com/content872.html](http://www.ripta.com/content872.html)

[www.erideshare.com/](http://www.erideshare.com/)

[carpool.php?dstate=RI](http://carpool.php?dstate=RI)

[www.providence.craigslist.org/](http://www.providence.craigslist.org/)

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[www.carpoolworld.com/](http://www.carpoolworld.com/)

Rhode Island fuel prices			
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>	Monday	Last week	Last year
Regular gasoline, self-serve	\$ 3.949	\$ 4.039	\$ 2.919

Home heating oil	\$ 4.419	\$ 4.589	\$ 2.699
Diesel fuel	\$ 4.949	\$ 4.919	\$ 2.979

Source: RI Office of Energy ResourcesCarpooling gasoline savings

>	Miles to Providence	Total monthly miles	Monthly fuel cost	Annual fuel cost	Annual savings 2-person carpool	Annual savings 4-person carpool
Barrington	10.5	420	\$ 83	\$ 995	\$ 498	\$ 746
Burrillville	23.6	944	\$ 186	\$ 2,237	\$ 1,118	\$ 1,678
Little Compton	34.6	1384	\$ 273	\$ 3,279	\$ 1,640	\$ 2,459
Newport	33.7	1348	\$ 266	\$ 3,194	\$ 1,597	\$ 2,395
N. Kingstown	22.7	908	\$ 179	\$ 2,151	\$ 1,076	\$ 1,614
Pawtucket	5.7	228	\$ 45	\$ 540	\$ 270	\$ 405
Warwick	11.5	460	\$ 91	\$ 1,090	\$ 545	\$ 817
Westerly	44.3	1772	\$ 350	\$ 4,199	\$ 2,099	\$ 3,149
Woonsocket	15	600	\$ 118	\$ 1,422	\$ 711	\$ 1,066
Fall River	18.6	744	\$ 147	\$ 1,763	\$ 881	\$ 1,322

Assumptions: 20 miles per gallon; \$3.949 per gallon gasoline; 20 workdays per month; mileage figures from Google Maps

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