

Going My Way?

By Kevin Fritz

When gas reaches \$4 a gallon, **carpooling** seems like a welcome economic relief. But these Central Floridians have learned that joining together with their co-workers is about more than just saving money.

Matt Holjes is saving \$172 a month and is really getting to know his co-workers. Kelly Canova is excited about reducing her carbon footprint. Amanda Hutton is a recent convert. Dina Pancoast enjoys the flexibility. Welcome to the world of carpooling in Central Florida, a resurging subculture whose local ranks continue to flourish.

Less Gas, Lighter Footprint

Kelly Canova, a graphic artist for the American Automobile Association (AAA), has been carpooling from Oviedo for three years, long before it became environmentally trendy or the vast money saver it is today. She simply got together with her co-worker **Dawn Dobosh**, lived in Oviedo and also worked in Lake

Kelly Canova (left) and Dawn Dobosh both live in Oviedo and work at AAA in Lake Mary. They make an effort to be flexible in order to make their carpooling a success.

continued



Photo by John Zawacki, www.jzstudios.com

Mary, to make it happen.

"It just seemed like a good idea," she says, "and we have become very good friends." Like other carpoolers, Canova says it may not work to their advantage every single day, but lately they have been making more of an effort to be flexible when one may have to leave early, or one may have to stay late. "We're more desperate for financial reasons," she says.

Trading off drivers and cars every other day, the 46-mile roundtrip commute can save Canova more than \$25 each day that she does not drive, based on the IRS allotment for business travel of 58.5 cents per mile, which includes gas as well as wear and tear. Not to mention, Canova's Mitsubishi Gallant gives off approximately 8.7 tons of greenhouse gas emissions a year based on daily usage, according to the United States government. That number is significantly reduced by leaving the car at home. "I think that is important," she adds. "I recycle and use green bags—whatever is better for the planet."

Bonding with Co-Workers

Matt Holjes, business development director at Knight, a design and marketing firm in downtown Orlando, and **Amanda Hutton**, the company's creative manager who lives in East Orlando, have been carpooling for about three months and are joined by two other fellow employees. Each drive a week at a time and pay expenses. For this eastside Orlando clan, that includes not only gas, but also tolls, which alone account for \$2.50 a day or about \$50 a month.

"Coming from Pittsburgh, I saw carpooling all the time," says Avalon Park resident Holjes. "It was promoted by the city, and they also had high-occupancy vehicle (HOV) lanes." Those lanes, designated by a diamond on the road, are prevalent in cities such as Atlanta, Pittsburg and New York, to name a few. Holjes believes more people would be carpooling if they saw an HOV lane in action during the morning and evening commutes.

"Employers should also be encouraging employees to do this," adds Holjes. "For one thing, they sure are less likely to just take the day off."

Then there are the communal characteristics of carpooling. Indeed, just a few months ago, the four participants in this carpool knew little about each other even though they work in the same office. But trapped in a car twice a day, there is a certain inevitable bonding that takes place. "There is a social aspect to it that I really enjoy," says Holjes.

Flexible Commuting

Dina Pancoast started off carpooling on and off a couple months ago from Eustis with a fellow employee she knew well at Cox Radio in Orlando.

"At first it was just the thing to do for the environment," says Pancoast. Then the price of gas soared, and when it started pushing \$4 a gallon, they got serious. Now they carpool as

many as four days a week. Driving approximately 50 miles round-trip in her four-cylinder Ford Fusion, she is saving approximately \$35 a week on gas alone.

Pancoast says that flexibility is a key attribute in finding the right carpooler, noting in her situation, they merely keep a loose track of who drove last. She believes it's important not to be too regimented if you want to be a successful carpooler.

For those who have already found their holy grail of commuting, there appears to be no turning back. Holjes, for one, says he would continue to carpool even if gas prices miraculously plummeted. Hutton, who lives near Bithlo, confesses that she actually enjoyed her former solo commute as positive down time and a chance to switch on NPR. Today, however, she and her Honda CR-V are now an active part of the carpooling subculture.

Better yet, Hutton says, her worries about constant shop talk amongst her peers have been squelched. "It hasn't been like that at all," she admits. "We have just gotten to know each other so much better."

Want to Carpool, Too?

For those seeking carpoolers in their area, LYNX has a public Web site that commuters from the tri-county area can access that creates matches with compatible carpoolers. **Matthew P. Friedman**, manager of media relations, says the recent popularity of carpooling is evident in his statistics. Total carpools set up through its system are up more than 72 percent, involving 526 people in 238 carpools.

Some companies, such as AAA, have set up carpooling programs for employees. According to AAA's Community Relations Manager **Laura Palermo**, those interested in carpooling can post their requests on its intranet, and fellow workers can look to see if anyone matches their needs and/or schedule. ■

Amanda Hutton lives in East Orlando and carpools to Knight in downtown Orlando with other co-workers, whom she has gotten to know during their commute.



Photo by Jeff Chase, Offero Studios

WEB LIFE

Want to e-mail a friend or co-worker about joining a carpool? Visit our Web site at www.CentralFlorida-Lifestyle.com.