

Squeezed at pump, drivers seek options

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A major jump in gasoline prices in Massachusetts is sending more drivers in search of alternatives - aboard bicycles and in carpools. Some say they are curtailing trips and rethinking every mile they drive.

A survey Monday by AAA Southern New England found an average price of \$3.38 per gallon for self-serve, regular unleaded. That price is 19 cents more than a week ago and 15 cents above the previous record of \$3.23 set in the aftermath of Hurricane Katrina in 2005.

A year ago, gas averaged \$2.76 a gallon. Surveys say the \$4 gallon is not far off.

Still, short of making drastic lifestyle changes, some claim there is little motorists can do.

Sue Donnelly of Easthampton is not one of them. She stopped in at the Pride gas station on Union Street in Easthampton Monday afternoon, but not to buy gas. With her helmet buckled on her head and her bike handles gripped in her hands, Donnelly was ready to take off for her next errand - picking her daughter up at the Williston Northampton preschool.

'Gas is outrageous,' said Donnelly, who had a child-sized seat attached to her bike for her daughter. To save on gas expenses, Donnelly said she rides her bike to the library, her daughter's preschool and to stores for small errands, like purchasing coffee at Pride.

'When I was growing up, gas was under a dollar,' said Donnelly, 50.

Joshua Copen, 32, of Easthampton, was filling up his truck at Pride, where gas went up 4 cents Monday morning to \$3.45 per gallon.

Like Donnelly, Copen plans to ride a bike to save money. For that reason, he recently purchased a bike for \$1,200. 'I know it's going to pay for itself,' Copen said. 'I'm a professional teacher but a teacher's salary is not going to be enough for gas.'

Instead of paying \$100 to fill up twice a week, Copen plans to carpool, ride his new bike and make one less trip a week to the gas station, cutting his weekly fuel expense in half.

Copen popped the trunk to his truck and looked in it at his skateboard and his brother's bike, which he is borrowing until his new bike is ready. 'We've had it too good for too long,' Copen said.

Trip planning

As costs rise, some people are rearranging their schedules and even their jobs to save money they'd otherwise spend on gas.

Colleen Clark of Northampton said she can no longer work part-time in Springfield because of the expensive commute. 'I'm working for just the gas,' said Clark, who was filling up at Ernie's Sunoco on King Street in Northampton, Monday afternoon.

Her brother Rick Clark says it is too costly to take his van to Cape Cod, Lowell and New Hampshire for business trips.

Colleen Clark said she used to go to the Cape 'all the time' during the summer, but she doesn't know if she'll make a trip this summer. 'I get down there and I could end up paying \$5 for gas,' Clark said.

Mark Ducharme, interviewed Monday as he bought gas on King Street in Northampton, said he drives less than he used to, making five or six stops once a week. It costs him \$80 to fill his truck, which gets 15 miles per gallon.

'I think it's ridiculous ... all the profits the big oil companies are making, like Exxon and Mobil,' said Ducharme, of Westhampton.

Another truck owner, Ben Bristol of South Hadley, was lamenting the costs he faces while filling up Monday at a Mobil station on Route 9.

His Ford F-250 pickup truck took 35 gallons of gasoline and 110 gallons of diesel fuel. At almost \$4 a gallon, it was a hefty bill.

'It's frustrating to have to pay as much as we have to at the pump,' said Bristol, 27.

He said the jump in gas prices has forced him to stop taking as many road trips as he normally would. 'There will be no three-day vacations that I would have taken. You can't afford to go away any place for the weekend anymore,' he added.

What choices?

Though annoyed about high gas prices, driving less isn't an option, said some interviewed Monday.

Taylor Aldrich, 23, said the prices are making him rethink his priorities. The recent UMass graduate is from New Hampshire but moved to Amherst for a job.

'My commute isn't too bad, about 20 minutes to Montague. I still drive as much, I just pay more and make up for it with a loss of income and cutting back. Drinking less, stuff like that,' he said, as he replaced the gas cap on his Audi A4.

Although he isn't happy about paying almost \$4 a gallon for gas, Aldrich said he knew it was going to happen. 'I've been reading the papers and stuff and I'm expecting it to be over \$4 a gallon by the end of the summer,' he said.

Margurite Miller, 36, of Hadley commented on the shock of gas prices as she filled up her husband's Chevy Silverado.

'It's ridiculous. You can't afford to go anywhere,' she said. 'My daily commute is about seven miles to Northampton. That's bad enough. I still need to go the store and the post office.'

Pete Fessenden, 45, commutes to work in Hadley from East Longmeadow. He said gas prices are awful, as he filled the 14-gallon tank of his Honda Accord.

'There are no changes in my driving. I still have to go to work,' he said.

Fessenden said he plans to travel by car this summer, despite the state of gas prices.

Mary Schreiber, 66, of Shelburne Falls, drove her Scion to Hadley to do some shopping Monday. She stopped for gas at the Cumberland Farms on Route 9 where she filled up.

'I'm retired now, so I'm more conscious about spending more money,' she said. 'I was just standing here pumping my gas thinking that 10 gallons is going to cost me \$34.'

She noted that prices are at least a dollar more than they were a year and a half ago when she retired.

John Bos, whom Schreiber described as her 'shopping buddy,' sat in the passenger seat and commented on the number of SUVs and large trucks he saw at the dealerships as they passed through Hadley. 'The huge monster pickup trucks aren't selling on Route 9,' he said.

Will Spurgin of Amherst, a 45-year-old graduate student at the University of Massachusetts, said the high prices don't bother him that much.

'I don't mind. I think it's expensive but I'm OK with it,' he said. 'There will be fewer big cars on the road.'

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