



Powered by  Clickability

High gas prices alter driving habits

By Tom Vanden Brook and Paul Overberg, USA TODAY

Record gas prices have put a dent in our driving habits. The growth in miles driven in the USA, a mostly steep climb for 25 years, has flattened in the past year as gas prices spiked, according to a USA TODAY analysis of Federal Highway Administration data.

Driving in summer 2005 through August increased less than 1% — half the usual rate. Growth that slow hasn't occurred since the 1991 recession, according to the government's latest data, which are subject to revision.

The population and workforce grow by a bit more than 1% annually, meaning more people drive to work, so annual gains of less than that indicate a decrease in miles driven per person.

"There is a plateauing, or an extreme slowing of growth," says John Maples, research analyst at the Energy Information Administration. The \$3-a-gallon mark was a trigger, he says.

Americans are fighting high pump prices by combining a trip to the grocery store with business at the bank or taking a bus to work.

Ed Olson, 36, who owns the bar Zella in Chicago's Lincoln Park neighborhood, tries to schedule his errands together. "We try to make the dry cleaning trip and the trip to the bank on the same day."

This mundane choice, multiplied millions of times each day, appears to be having an impact.

The Urban Land Institute found that high gas prices, which peaked in early October after hurricanes Katrina and Rita, altered Americans' driving habits.

The institute, a non-profit group that promotes innovative development, found that 81% of people it polled this fall combined errands and 45% eliminated some non-work trips. Nearly 90% said they'd driven to work the previous week, but 40% said they had carpooled or used mass transit in the past year.

"Most Americans don't have a choice of how they get to work. They have to drive," says the institute's Ed McMahon. "So they've decided to eliminate optional trips (or) double up errands."

Subway, bus and train systems saw growing ridership in the first half of 2005 as gas prices climbed, says William Millar, president of the American Public Transportation Association.

The rates of increase doubled in late summer and fall.

"It seems very much associated with the rapid increase of gas prices at the end of August with Hurricane Katrina," Millar says.

In the Chicago area, 3.4 million more people used buses and trains in August 2005 over the year before, says Scott McPherson of the Regional Transportation Authority.

The Midwest had a 1.5% decrease in vehicle miles driven in August 2005 compared with 2004, the highway administration found.

Will the changes be permanent?

"It depends on what fuel prices do," Maples says. "We're hearing about the 'low' fuel price of \$2 per gallon. Nobody would have said that a year ago. We're already being reconditioned to what's normal."

▪ [REPRINTS & PERMISSIONS](#)

Find this article at:

http://www.usatoday.com/news/nation/2005-12-08-gas-prices_x.htm?POE=click-refer

Check the box to include the list of links referenced in the article.

