

PREDICTING SUICIDE: A NEW TEST OFFERS HOPE

THE  
BOSTON

# Globe

07.20.08

MAGAZINE

PLUS

The Problem With  
Unlimited Vacation

Do-It-Yourself  
Ice Cream

The Bike That  
Made a Marriage

YOU ARE HERE

YOU SHOULD BE HERE

*It's cheaper. It's greener. And nobody's doing it.*

## Why Won't We Carpool?

BY ALISON LOBRON

DRIVE  
TIME  
Busy I-93  
leaving  
Boston and  
the barren  
HOV lane

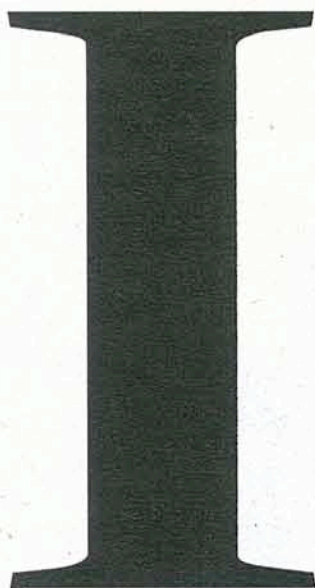




Gas prices are through the roof, and green living is all the rage. Yet Bostonians still can't bring themselves to carpool. Why a simple lifestyle change just isn't catching on.

# Anybody *want a* **RIDE?**

By ALISON LOBRON  
Illustration by TOM COCOTOS



**IT IS 5 P.M. ON A**

Monday, and in Government Center, everyone but Carol Lavalée seems to be on a solo mission. Men and women in business suits yammer into cellphones without so much as a glance at anyone else on the sidewalk. Mammoth SUVs, most carrying only a driver, chug through the narrow cow-path streets. Amid all this single-mindedness, Lavalée, 65, settles into a shady spot outside the Staples store on Court Street to wait for the 13 other people who will share her ride home to Worcester.

Car pool riders find one another through employers, websites, the state Executive Office of Transportation, and word of mouth. Some use their own vehicles, while other groups, like Lavalée's band, form what's known as a van pool: A group gets together and leases a van specifically for the purpose of commuting. Members divvy up both the driving and the costs, including gas, maintenance, and insurance. The arrangement means that Lavalée, who has shared rides to work for more than a decade, has to get out her front door at the same time every morning and leave the office at the same time every evening. It also means she's occasionally inconvenienced when a fellow rider runs a little late or is in a bad mood. Being in a van pool, jokes the cheerful court stenographer with spiky red hair, is like marriage: "There are days you just have to pretend you don't hear someone." In both social contracts, participants initially fear the loss of independence and autonomy, but once they start reaping the benefits, many will quickly forget that they ever lived another way. "It's fun," Lavalée says of her current group. "We have a really good van."

Good for the environment, the pocketbook, and perhaps even the social life, car pooling would seem, at this particular moment in his-

tory, to have a lot going for it. Environmentalists and traffic planners say it's one of the easiest and cheapest ways for cities to decrease pollution and congestion – never mind helping individuals reduce transportation expenses, which as of 2006 consumed approximately 15 percent of the average American budget (12 percent for those in the Northeast), according to the Bureau of Labor Statistics. And unlike public transit, a car pool requires little in the way of costly taxpayer-funded infrastructure or maintenance.

But Americans don't carpool much. In fact, over the past quarter century, despite increased traffic, fuel costs, and growing awareness of environmental issues, we've been doing it less and less. According to the federal Department of Transportation, the number of solo drivers on US roads nearly tripled between 1960 and 2000. In 1980, when the US Census began tracking car pooling, almost 20 percent of American workers shared rides to work. By 1990, the number had fallen to 13 percent. In 2006 – the newest data available – it was down to about 11 percent. Now, however, with 2008 poised to go down in history as the Year of the \$4 Gallon of Gas, drivers are showing an interest in alternatives. MBTA ridership jumped 6.4 percent between January and June. A spokeswoman for the state's MassRIDES program, which maintains a ride-matching database, says her office is getting more calls than usual from commuters feeling the pinch. With so much attention focused on the cost of driving, policy makers have an unprecedented window of opportunity to encourage car pooling. "It's something people can do immediately that would have a fairly dramatic impact on what they're spending on gasoline," says David Luberoff, executive director of Harvard's Rapaport Institute for Greater Boston.

So where's the line of takers?

**IT SHOULD BE SAID THAT CAR POOLING** isn't quite as easy as it used to be. Michael Repogle, transportation director for the New York-based research and lobbying group Environmental Defense Fund, puts much of the blame on shifts in where jobs are located. "Jobs have been moving out to the suburbs for the last 40 years," he says. Rather than most workers commuting to one downtown area – making it likely that you and your neighbor are going the same way – many of us now go from suburb to suburb for work.

Another problem is what Luberoff calls "the independence thing." A century's worth of advertising has encouraged Americans to see drivers as adventurers and explorers. Consider this 1924 marketing slogan: "To own a Ford is to be free to venture into new and untried places." More recently, Volkswagen's "Drivers Wanted" campaign equated command of a vehicle with command of one's own life. There aren't ad-

campaigns for passengers – at least, not now. To encourage fuel conservation during WWII, the government attempted to paint driving alone as unpatriotic, if not downright treasonous. A cartoon poster from the era shows a man driving alone in his automobile. Next to him sits the shadowy outline of a passenger with a little square mustache. The caption reads, "When you ride alone, you ride with Hitler."

But for most of the last century, government policies have favored road construction and transit building over programs to facilitate or encourage ride sharing. And no major industries are lobbying for car pools. "There is not the natural constituency that supports the expenditure of any money," Luberoff says – among them, giant corporations that would like to get government contracts for building highways or commuter rail lines. Car pooling, by its decentralized nature, has "very dispersed benefits," so no one group benefits financially in a big enough way for its members to bother lobbying the government. Government policies that could work, he says – like offering car poolers privileged parking spots, or requiring employers to support car pooling employees and penalize solo drivers – tend to have fewer committed supporters than wider roads, new subway cars, and expanded bus lines.

But government has to get involved to make a significant change. While some individuals will alter their habits because of rising gas prices – been on the T lately? – New York-based transportation economist Charles Komanoff says most people don't significantly alter their behavior based on incremental cost increases. What's needed are bigger shocks for drivers who go it alone, and bigger rewards for those who carpool.

Komanoff offers an example: California requires large businesses that reimburse employees for off-site parking costs to offer the same cash payment to employees who don't use the off-site parking. The businesses affected by the law, he says, saw a 12 percent reduction in the number of cars being driven to work each day, on average. A more radical version Komanoff imagines: legislation requiring large employers that now offer free parking to collect a daily fee of \$5 or \$10 per car and to put all the proceeds into a sort of piggy bank. At the end of each month, the company would divide the pot evenly among all its employees. So someone who drove alone every day would lose money. Someone who shared rides and split the daily fee would make money, especially if three or four people rode in one vehicle. Those who sometimes drove alone and sometimes carpooled would likely break even. According to Komanoff's calculations, such a scheme would reduce the number of cars on the road significantly – perhaps as much as 20 percent.

---

*Alison Lobron, a freelance writer in Cambridge, is a frequent contributor to the Globe Magazine. Send comments to [magazine@globe.com](mailto:magazine@globe.com).*



**ON THE ROAD** Worcester-area commuters (clockwise from far left) Juan Flores, Veronica Bachand, Ray Minchillo, Carol Lavallee, Stephen Papazian, Doug Kingman, Jessica To, Darlene Wong-Kam, Michelle Gauthier, and Ed Woo lease a van to get to work in Boston. They share driving duty as well as lease, gas, maintenance, and insurance costs.

But he acknowledges that such a scheme would require extra red tape, and there's absolutely no incentive for employers to do it. "The employees as a group are not going to be better off financially, but they and everyone else on the road will get where they're going a little faster."

In addition to work-based initiatives, Komanoff points to successes several foreign cities have had with what's known as congestion pricing – charging more to drive at popular times. Tolls go up automatically during peak hours, and in some cities, motorists must pay a fee to drive into busy urban centers. The logic is that people will alter commuting times – or share rides – in order to save money, much as many of us will willingly fly at off-peak times if it means a lower airfare. And the idea works.

Singapore began charging fees to enter its downtown in 1975. According to data collected by the Environmental Defense Fund, the city has seen a 45 percent decrease in traffic and a 20 percent increase in the use of public transportation since then. More recently, Stockholm and London adopted similar schemes to encourage both transit use and ride sharing. The Environmental Defense Fund estimates that London traffic moves 37 percent faster and uses 20 percent less fuel than it did before the fees began in 2003. And in Stockholm, where a pricing plan went into effect in 2006, traffic is moving 15 percent faster.

A similar policy recently gained some traction in America's most populous city. In 2007, the US Department of Transportation awarded a \$354 million grant to New York City to establish a congestion-pricing system, with most of the money earmarked for new bus routes. The City Council signed off on a plan that would

charge drivers \$8 to enter Manhattan during rush hour, but the state Legislature declined to give its approval, so the plan went nowhere.

**C**ONGESTION PRICING and parking fees may well provide an incentive to carpool, but they won't address another major obstacle: the often difficult logistics of car pooling.

Yet, a few American cities have devised some ingenious ways for commuters to share rides without coordinating schedules – and, in some cases, without even knowing one another.

In the San Francisco Bay Area, for example, vehicles with three or more occupants don't have to pay bridge tolls of \$4 or \$5 to enter the city during rush hour. So at designated sites near the bridges, thousands of commuters park their cars – or get dropped off – and form what's known as a "casual car pooling" line. They are, in effect, hitchhikers. Drivers on their way downtown will scoop these riders up, usually two at a time, for the trip across the Bay. There's no need to coordinate schedules, the way a formal carpool does, since riders hop into whatever car comes along that's going their way. No money exchanges hands; drivers avoid a toll and riders get a free trip. In the evenings, lines form at designated sites in the city for the reverse commute.

Leaping into a different stranger's car every day may sound like one of those things that only Californians would embrace. But Washington, D.C., has a similar system that's especially popular among employees at one of its least intercultural institutions: the Pentagon. In the Virginia suburbs, the incentive is speed rather

than money. High-occupancy vehicle lanes between Northern Virginia and the District move significantly faster than the regular lanes, but cars in those lanes must carry at least three people. So drivers there are eager to collect passengers, and, as in San Francisco, willing riders form lines at designated areas.

According to David LeBlanc, an Army officer and frequent D.C. car pooler, the practice began almost by accident in the 1970s, soon after the creation of the first HOV lanes on Interstate 95. Knowing how much time they could save by riding in the HOV lane – which then required four occupants per car – drivers began cruising by bus stops and offering free rides.

"They'd pull up to bus stops and say, 'Hey, we're going to the Pentagon. Do you want a ride?' Twenty thousand people work at the Pentagon, so they'd just hop in," says LeBlanc, who lives in Woodbridge, Virginia. "Before too long, the bus would pull up and open the door, and nobody would get on, even though there were 20 people." Irritated bus drivers, long accustomed to keeping an eye out for counterfeit bus tokens, or "slugs," began referring to the counterfeit riders as "human slugs." The name stuck, and casual car pooling in D.C. is known as "slugging."

When LeBlanc moved to D.C. in 1997, he hated the idea of riding in a car with strangers. "I liked my independence. I took the bus," he says. And then one wet, dreary February morning, a slugger was born. As LeBlanc was waiting for the bus, he saw people in a slug line across the street hopping into warm cars. LeBlanc says he began wondering why he was "standing in the rain, waiting to pay five bucks to get to work slower." He started slugging that day. When he slugs, he gets to his office in 30 minutes. When he drives alone → PAGE 32

## Anybody Want a Ride?

CONTINUED FROM PAGE 25

in a regular lane, the ride can take up to three times as long. "We move anywhere from 5- to 7,000 people a day, an amazing thing when you think it's basically hitchhikers," says LeBlanc, who has become the movement's de facto spokesman. He maintains a website (slug-lines.com) that lists pickup and drop-off places, offers advice on how to start a new slug-line location, and explains the etiquette of slugging (conversation should be kept to a minimum; drivers choose the music).

Federal employee Jennifer Nikolaisen, 32, is a more recent convert. When she moved to Virginia from Florida in 2007, the idea of riding with strangers alarmed her. But once she tried a slug line, she quickly became a regular. Nikolaisen reports only one unpleasant experience, riding with a driver who talked on his cellphone the whole way and swerved from lane to lane. "If I saw him again, I wouldn't ride," she says. Sluggers do sometimes step aside and wait for another car, just as drivers can reject a passenger. "If people pull up with music banging really loud, I'm not going to get in," Nikolaisen says.

Although slugging etiquette calls for silence, Nikolaisen has made a few friends and been asked out once. And she can't believe how quickly she's grown accustomed to a system that, at first, seemed nerve-racking. "Now it's so second nature," she says, "I don't think about it."

HERE IN BOSTON, THERE ARE SEVERAL efforts underway to make car pooling, if not second nature, at least more appealing and feasible. But we lack many of the incentives and penalties that have worked in other cities. Car poolers here don't get a significant break on tolls, the way they do in San Francisco. And our definition of "high occupancy vehicle" is two occupants, not three. Klark Jessen, a spokesman for the Massachusetts Highway Department, acknowledges that some of the cars in HOV lanes on I-93 "include an adult dropping a child off at day care, a different category than two neighbors deciding to ride together."

Jessen says his agency does not measure ride time in the HOV lane versus a regular lane, but anecdotal reports suggest the time savings are nowhere near as significant as in Washington D.C. When the Highway Department counted total northbound cars on I-93 one morning in 2007, 20 percent of the traffic was in the HOV lane. That left three lanes for the other 80 percent of cars. As Cambridge resident and transportation entrepreneur Robin Chase puts it, HOV lanes in Boston "are only buying you a quarter-mile."

Chase, who founded the car sharing company Zipcar in 2000, is one of a number of people trying to use the Internet to make car

pooling easier. In 2007, she launched the for-profit website Goloco.org, which lets users seek out others with similar backgrounds for ride sharing. The state's Office of Transportation also runs a website, Commute.com, where commuters can be matched with others going the same way. Other online resources include Erideshare.com, Carpool-world.com, and Craigslist. Most are free; Goloco is free to join and arrange car pools, but it charges a transaction fee for ride sharers who exchange gas money via the site.

These sites have facilitated some car pools, but success has so far been limited. This past year, when I was commuting from my home in Cambridge to a teaching job in Concord, I didn't get any matches on Commute.com. "Not a lot of people know we're here," says Jennifer Walsh Carroll, a spokeswoman for MassRIDES, which runs the site. On Goloco.org, I found 32 members in my ZIP code. But according to their profiles - which indicate the number of rides shared and amounts of carbon dioxide saved - none had actually arranged a trip on the site. Chase says that the site has not yet become profitable. On the "rideshare" section of Craigslist, hopeful car poolers also report difficulties making connections despite the appearance of significant interest. On a recent summer day, there were 20 ads from the previous week. But when I e-mailed several people to ask if I could interview them, all who responded said they'd yet to hear from anyone but me.

"I got all excited when I saw your message," says Jason Berman, a Northeastern University student hoping to share the commute from his family's Andover home to his marketing co-op at TJX in Framingham. He's eager to split the \$300 he expects to spend each month filling up his '94 Volvo station wagon. But Berman, 21, says he's had no luck finding a passenger, despite posting the ad on Craigslist and hanging a flyer in his local Starbucks.

Chase believes any Web-based initiative must also address the "stranger anxiety" that keeps some from ride sharing - and that initially made both LeBlanc and Nikolaisen wary of slugging. Goloco works a little like a dating site, in that users can search each other out based on criteria like alma mater and employer. Chase (who walks to work but whose car pooling profile lists gardening, climate change, and knitting among her interests) says she hopes the additional information will help people overcome the fear of riding with someone they don't know. "You don't have to share rides with strangers," she says. "You can share with people you have something in common with."

For many of us, the most useful thing to have in common with a car pooler is an office in the same building or the same block. Commute.com is part of a larger program called MassRIDES, which the Office of Transpor-



**WORTH THE WAIT** Commuters outside Washington, D.C., wait in car pool lines, known as "slug lines," for a free ride to work.

tation launched in 2004. According to spokeswoman Carroll, MassRIDES works with more than 300 of the state's large employers - from hospitals to corporations - to arrange employee van pools. The agency also offers incentives directly to commuters. If a new van pool sticks together for a year, MassRIDES will pay up to \$1,400 toward the lease in the van's 13th month. Those who form a new car pool using their own vehicle can get a \$25 gas card. And regular car pools or van pools of three or more riders can get unlimited use of the Mass. Pike for \$145 a year.

Incentives such as these are useful. But judging by interviews with a range of transportation experts and planners, three things need to happen if Boston wants to get serious about car pooling. First, since our geography may not lend itself to casual car pooling, we need an Orbitz-style website that aggregates information from all of the ride sharing sites, and we need to advertise it. Second, lawmakers need to consider more significant financial perks for car poolers, like San Francisco's free bridge tolls, as well as financial penalties for solo drivers, like London's entry fee or work-based parking fees. And third, all of us who typically drive alone need to examine our own attitudes about car pooling.

After all, in addition to a dislike of coordinating schedules, a cultural aversion to sharing rides should not be underestimated. When I asked a number of my friends whether they had considered car pooling, several looked at me as if I'd suggested they skip showering for a month or three. "Driving time is the only time of day that I'm alone and can think," says one, a high school teacher with a 15-mile one-way commute. As the Rappaport Institute's David Luberoff puts it, cars offer important "private time" for many of us.

But as I interviewed regular car poolers, it became clear that, as in dating, there's probably a car pool match out there for most of us. There are social pools and non-social pools. Some vans have strict "no-talking" policies, and riders rarely interact. In others, the commuters debate politics and sometimes socialize on weekends.

Michelle Gauthier of Charlton, who rides with Carol Lavalley, has been in five different van pools over the past 17 years. A gregarious legal assistant at WilmerHale, the 44-year-old Gauthier says riders often switch vans to find ones that better accommodate their schedules and preferences. (Van poolers commit financially on a month-to-month basis.) Some vans have assigned seats and printed regulations governing things like how much conversation can occur, but that's not Gauthier's style. She likes that her current van is "pretty friendly," but also that "if you're tired, you sleep. Monday mornings, there's not a lot of chatter."

She can be quiet or chatty; sleepy or not. She can, in other words, be herself in the car pool. ■