

Biking, busing and buddying-up: Fewer commuters go it alone

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Even though gasoline prices had declined to more tolerable levels, more of us found alternate ways of getting to work in 2008, according to figures recently released by the U.S. Census Bureau.

There's no question that the car is still king, but the number of people who drove to work alone dropped in Beaver, Allegheny and Lawrence counties in 2008, while those who carpooled, took public transportation or walked to their jobs increased.

The data, part of the 2008 American Community Survey, shows that more than 80 percent of workers 16 years and older in Beaver County still drove alone in their personal vehicles to get to work in 2008. But that figure dropped from 84.5 percent over the previous three years, and the general manager of the Beaver County Transit Authority thinks the downturn in the economy is behind the change.

"I think there's no question that the tight economy got more people thinking about finding an alternative way to get to work," said Mary Jo Morandini. "We just completed the biggest year we've ever had, and I have to believe that's the reason."

BCTA fixed-route riders took more than 811,000 bus rides in the one-year period that ended June 30, Morandini said. That was a jump of 7.5 percent from the previous year, when BCTA counted 754,000 riders.

Kristen Sheleheda, BCTA's supervisor of planning, marketing and business development, said numbers in the current year will be driven down by the week that Pittsburgh hosted the G-20 Summit; the authority used just four buses into Pittsburgh that week, instead of the normal 20. That aberration aside, Morandini said she expects the growth to continue.

"It's a smart decision," she said. "Every time you ride public transportation, you're leaving your car at home and saving on gas, on maintenance, on parking. It's like putting money back into your wallet, and everyone is looking for ways to do that."

The census figures show that people who rode bicycles to and from work declined slightly in all three counties, but Marlin Erin, owner of Snitger's Bicycle Store in Beaver, thinks it could catch on here as it has in the city of Pittsburgh.

“There are limitations in Beaver County, like the lack of bike lanes or narrow road shoulders,” Erin said. “But if you look at what Pittsburgh has done in just a few years, and you look at what some of the local municipalities are doing to support rail trails here, it’s not hard to think that bike commuting could be a big deal here.”

Erin said Pittsburgh has added bike lanes to major roads in the city and made other commitments to making itself a more bike-friendly town.

“Five years ago, no one would have thought of Pittsburgh as being a bike-friendly city, but now it’s on the map,” he said. “It takes a commitment from the municipal governments, and it can be done here.”

A huge step would be the continued support of the Ohio River Trail Council, the group that wants to build rail trails that would run along the Ohio River from East Liverpool, Ohio, through Beaver County to Robinson Township, where it would connect with the Montour Trail, Erin said.

“The municipalities have lined up to support that trail, and that’s really encouraging,” he said. “If people have access to something like that, they will use it, and they’ll use it every day.”

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