

Energy SmackdownTM

Smart Transit: How, When and If At All

The business of coming and going has recently gotten a lot more complicated. First came the evidence that we humans are contributing to global warming with disturbing and potentially catastrophic consequences. How we choose to get around, we now know, has a particularly toxic effect on our environment.

Lately, the consequence has been to our wallets. Gas prices have soared, and even more alarming is that the increasing cost of fuel is not simply a short-term problem. Many people forget that oil is a finite resource. Our insatiable hunger for it finally has reached the point where demand is outstripping supply. The age of cheap oil is coming to an end. As a result, the ease and convenience of supporting our sprawling lifestyle is being challenged.

Take a look at any major highway during rush hour though, and it is evident there is little thought towards change -- millions of cars, mostly with single occupants who are wasting hours of their life in traffic to get to jobs that are needed to support our big American ways. It seems as if we don't care.

But many of us do care. And we are ready to make changes. How to go about change is where things get sticky. However, the bottom line is that choosing how to get around, when to get around and even if we should be getting around at all, is one facet that each of us can control right now.

There has been a lot of information in the media on ways we can save money, increase fuel economy and decrease our carbon emissions. These suggestions are invaluable, but it's time to raise the volume and get more creative.

Consider for example the following useful common tips -- with a twist:

1) **Common tip:** Commute to work by public transportation. **Twist:** Think about ways to not have to commute at all. Propose telecommuting at least a day or two a week. Do a cost analysis of starting a home or local office. Consider moving closer to work even if this means a big life change. Perhaps a lifestyle that made sense a year ago, does not make sense looking forward.

2) **Common tip:** Ride a bike and/or walk more. **Twist:** Nearly half of all trips in the U.S. are three miles or less, and a quarter of these trips are less than a mile -- distances easily doable by bike. In decent weather, traveling al fresco is delightful and invigorating. But the joy ends when the route feels dangerous or overly challenging. Carving bike paths along the major thoroughfares through towns and cities, and proposing by-laws to support safety and efficiency will increase ridership.

3) **Common Tip:** Trade-in a gas guzzler for an economy car. **Twist:** Owning a car is an “entitlement” that most of us just presume. When is the last time we questioned if we even need to own a car? Car sharing networks like Zip Car are appearing even in suburban communities, challenging us to think about the high costs of car ownership versus other ways of getting around. Every shared vehicle replaces at least five to fifteen private vehicles. Even downsizing the number of cars per family is an option that can have a significant financial, social and environmental impact.

4) **Common tip:** Chose trains instead of airplanes for shorter travel. **Twist:** Our public transportation system in the U.S. is abysmal. Train travel is not even an option for a huge swath of the country. Our train system needs a complete overhaul. Other public transit methods need to be explored -- light rail, street cars, Jetson-style people movers. even the age-old rickshaw -- whatever it takes. Our leaders need to hear this again and again until something is done.

5) **Common tip:** Car-pool. **Twist:** Share rides with friends. How many times have you met friends at the movies, the beach or a concert by driving there in separate cars? A new service, GoLoco.org helps friends share rides for local trips.

6) **Common tip:** Buy a hybrid. **Twist:** All available alternative fuel technologies (including hybrid electric, diesel/biodiesel, ethanol, and natural gas) still have many drawbacks that need to be addressed. (e.g. hybrid battery replacement and disposal, and food supply/pricing issues related to ethanol production.) If the energy experts are correct, even a combination of these alternatives will still not support the infrastructure cheap oil has created. Conservation is still the clear winner.

7) **Common tip:** Eco-travel. **Twist:** Stay home. While this seems simple it takes a concerted effort to reverse our habitual on-the-go mentality. Try it anyway. Read. Hang out with the neighbors. Make love. Tinker in the garage. Play cards with the kids. Plant a garden.

For most of us, determining how to run our lives less dependent on our cars is not a simple task. Not having a clearly superior alternative to driving, however, could be seen as a *good* thing. Instead of continuing on as happy motoring Americans, we will be forced to make some deeper behavioral changes. Perhaps instead of the focus being on the comings and goings of daily life, we might actually start living more meaningfully in the time between.

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