

High gas prices are fueling concerns of employers

Survey finds increased interest in carpooling, biking and walking

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Soaring gas prices and the cost of getting to work is a "significant concern" to Hunterdon County employers, according to a new survey.

Virtually all respondents to the poll, conducted jointly by HART Commuter Information Services and the Hunterdon County Chamber of Commerce, indicated as much.

And interest appears to be growing for options addressing that concern — namely carpooling, bicycling, walking and offering flexible hours, according to the poll.

Just over 27 percent of respondents to the survey — or 16 of 59 — indicated they are choosing to carpool to a worksite.

"Even more heartening is that 34 percent said they would like more information on carpooling opportunities," said Tara Shepherd, executive director of HART, the nonprofit Flemington-based alliance aiming to reduce traffic congestion and provide information on transportation choices in the county.

The survey, results of which were released over the holiday weekend, was launched July 1 when the average cost for a gallon of gasoline in New Jersey reached \$3.97. By the time the survey wrapped up Aug. 15, the price had dropped to \$3.56.

The poll drew a "good representation of a cross-section of employers" in the county, from small mom-and-pop organizations to the largest employers, including Merck, Shepherd said.

Nearly 85 percent indicated that gas prices and the cost of getting to work is a "significant concern," the survey said.

Shepherd said she was enthused to see a spike in bicycling as an alternative mode of transportation to a job. Nearly 19 percent of employees have begun pedaling to work, even occasionally, the poll showed.

And just over 15 percent are pounding the pavement with their own two feet, opting to walk to work, the survey revealed.

The notion of a four-day work week appears to draw strong feelings. Almost half of those polled — or 45.7 percent — say employees

have asked for a compressed work week to reduce commuting costs. But most companies acknowledged they do not offer that option because it would not be conducive to meeting the company's needs.

All these options have been out there, but people have not been motivated enough to take advantage of them, said Michael Egenton, vice president of environment and transportation for the New Jersey State Chamber of Commerce, a 2,000-member Trenton-based group.

"It's amazing that it takes the high cost of gasoline to have people re-examine their options," he said.

HART works with just over 75 employers in Hunterdon, facilitating the formation of car pools and vanpools, and providing vouchers for bicycle maintenance at local bike shops.

Shepherd said HART and the chamber joined forces for the first time for a survey to broaden a sampling of replies.

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