

# Vanpooling Proves Test of Time

By Mark Wright for MetroPool, Inc. Commuter Connections newsletter  
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Little did a handful of pioneer-minded companies know 20 years ago that their end run around the gas crises of the '70s would evolve into such a durable commute alternative. Vanpooling is alive and well, in different forms, around the country.

## Our Own Backyard

While vanpools were at their heyday locally during the ECO mandate period, their numbers are still significant. As of October 31, 1997, 92 vanpools carried 736 riders to work and back each day in MetroPool's Connecticut and New York service areas.

The "third party" vanpool services available to commuters through MetroPool include Easy Street and VPSI. Easy Street\*, the Connecticut state vanpool program, uses vans provided for MetroPool by The Rideshare Company in Hartford. VPSI is a private, nationwide fleet management firm with nearly 20 years experience specializing in vanpools. The two programs offer commuters a helpful range of options.

Prospective vanpoolers seeking service through Easy Street need to begin or end their commute in Connecticut, since the state subsidizes the fares. Easy Street's vans are easily recognized with their eye-catching design -- green, yellow, and purple on a white background. The "Easy Street" name and toll free phone number appears on each van, inviting potential riders to call 800/972-EASY. Callers reach an automated voice mail system offering detailed information.

A minimum of eight people is required to start or continue a van, and the passengers' fare is locked-in, making the price predictable. Fares are based on round trip mileage, changing in five mile increments. For example, a 29 mile round trip would

run \$70/month, an 89 commute would be \$100, and a 129 mile trip would cost \$141. Part time and daily fares are also available. Fuel and other costs are built into the fare, including 24 hour roadside assistance.

Drivers commute for free, and must have five years of driving experience, get their driving record checked, and go through Easy Street's training video and test. Drivers can also request behind-the-wheel training if necessary.

When it's time for maintenance, Easy Street brings a back up van to the driver, then returns the group's van when repairs or servicing is completed. Easy Street manager Laura Dowaliby said it takes drivers about half an hour per month to fill out a log reporting rider status and other details.

As an alternative choice, VPSI offers a traditional third party vanpool program, providing the van, maintenance and liability insurance for one monthly fee. The fee is then split by the vanpool riders, with the driver going for free. VPSI drivers must be at least 25, with five years of driving experience, have their driving record checked, watch a safety video and go through an orientation in the van.

The driver/coordinator determines riders' fares each month, based on the number of people in the van: the more riders in the van, the less they each have to pay, since the overall van fee remains the same. The driver can also allow for part-time or temporary riders. VPSI has no minimum number of riders required. The riders also split the cost of fuel, reimbursing the driver on a regular basis.

Each VPSI van has the MetroPool name and toll free number -- 800/FIND-RIDE -- on the side. Maintenance is performed every 6,000 miles. During maintenance periods, VPSI

provides a loaner van when one is available. If no loaner can be provided, VPSI prorates the fare.

VPSI has provided service to Connecticut/New York area commuters since the early 1980s. The company offers a variety of vehicles, including an eight-passenger luxury van, nine- to 15-passenger standard vans, 12- and 14-passenger luxury vans, plus minivans.

## Support for Vanpooling Shifts

In a departure from the earlier years, vanpool programs are rarely employer-sponsored, these days. "U.S. Tobacco was the last employer in this area to pay for vans," recalled VPSI's Connecticut area manager Rich Dougherty. The national trend has been toward third-party vanpooling, where groups of commuters team up to share the costs involved in leasing a van. Some employers will still help the employees by recruiting other riders, however, or allowing them to pay their fares through payroll deduction.

"Some employers are using vanpooling as a human resources tool for recruiting," said MetroPool's John Marshak. "Some also provide their vanpools with a preferred parking spot."

Certain employers also assist their employees by purchasing TransitCheks for them, which can be used to help pay the fare on third-party vanpools. Although the Port Authority of New York and New Jersey, which runs the TransitChek program, doesn't keep stats on how many TransitChek vouchers are used for vanpooling vs. transit, the program saw \$42 million in sales last year. A total of 1,776,178 vouchers were sold in 1996, and about 1.7 million vouchers have been sold so far in 1997, said

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Janet Wolochuk, TransitChek program manager. Since 1987, 7,672 employers have participated in the TransitChek program, including 1,758 this year. The vouchers are sold in \$15, \$21, \$30, and \$35 denominations. (Commuters can call 800/331-CHEK for more information.)

While less financial support is coming from employers, the public sector is helping to pick up some of the slack.

The state of Connecticut will pay for about a third of a TransitChek's cost. Connecticut will also subsidize empty seats for new vanpools to help get them going. The subsidy is calculated on a sliding scale for four to six months, gradually declining over that period. Vanpool groups are expected to fill the van on their own and with their employer's help.

The state of Virginia exempts vanpools from its hefty personal property tax, saving both commuters and the van operators a bundle.

Out on the west coast, the San Diego Association of Governments (SANDAG) sought and received assistance through the Federal Transit Administration's (FTA) Capital Cost of Contracting program. The FTA assistance allows SANDAG to provide its 130 vanpools with a \$300 per month subsidy, which is paid directly to the vehicle provider. Jurisdictions like SANDAG which participate in FTA's subsidy program must require subsidized vanpools to report monthly ridership, travel time, and mileage data, which then goes into the National Transit Data Base. While the local jurisdiction must be able to contribute some money to the program up front, the FTA funds enable significant vanpool fleet expansion. (Details: Stephanie Lewis - SANDAG: 619/595-5337)

Pace, a suburban Chicago public transit agency, operates its 276 vanpools as an extension of the transit system. Pace's brand of vanpooling is more like a fixed-route minibus service, with fares based on zones along Pace-designated routes. Pace

offers conveniences like ticket by mail and checking account debits to make vanpooling easier. Using a range of vehicle types -- from 4-6 passenger minivans to 11-15 passenger maxivans, some equipped with wheelchair lifts -- Pace offers a so called open door policy on its vans, which guarantees a seat to any rider who's paid his or her monthly fare. Riders pay in advance and receive a monthly pass, much like a traditional transit system. Pace riders can also seamlessly connect their route to work using a combination of bus and vanpool. By buying a Pace Commuter Club Card, riders can use all fixed route bus services at no extra charge, allowing them to take a bus to their vanpool stop, then vanpooling the rest of the way to work. The flexible approach has expanded the number of potential riders for Pace's vans, thus overcoming one of the challenges common to most vanpools: keeping the seats as full as possible. (Details: Shamus Misek - Pace: 847/228-4278)

### **Insurance and Safety Challenges Face Owner-Operators**

Insurance continues to be a challenge for owner-operated vanpools. "A survey conducted about two and a half years ago showed that 65 percent of owner-operators rely on their personal insurance," said Roger Ney of Bethesda, Maryland-based Dreyfus Ney Insurance Co. (301/656-3994). Those who do so are "basically uninsured," Ney explained, since most insurers consider vanpooling a form of commercial livery and won't cover it under personal auto policies. Moreover, the liability limits on most personal policies are far below what's required to effectively cover a group of commuters paying to ride in a van, anyway. Owner-operators who remain tempted to use their personal policy would do well to refer to the decision handed down by the Indiana Court of Appeals December 20, 1996, in the case of Meridian Mutual Insurance vs. Auto Owners Insurance Co.

"We've tried to get the word out to

drivers to educate them on this," said Ney, whose company formed the National Association for Safe Vanpooling a year ago. Dreyfus Ney has provided vanpool insurance for seven years through the Travelers and Hartford insurance companies. "The difference (between a personal and vanpool policy) might be \$600-800," said Ney, "but the liability exposure isn't worth it. It's short sighted."

### **What's On the Horizon?**

Michael Boylan, chairperson of the Association for Commuter Transportation's (ACT) Vanpool Council (301/656-3994), said the Council is collecting information about "best practices" in vanpooling which will be published in the Association's TDM Review journal. The Vanpool Council is looking at other issues, as well, including marketing questions, keeping van utilization high, and encouraging safety seminars for drivers.

Another development to watch: "virtual vanpooling." As with so much else in the late 1990's, vanpooling has found a new kind of life on the Internet. Commuter-friendly web sites abound in Cyberspace, and that means easier access for people seeking alternatives to single-occupant driving. Use a typical search engine, such as Yahoo!, plug in the word "vanpool," and watch the links pop up.

Even as Cyberspace beckons, vanpooling continues to prove that it's firmly rooted in commuters' present-day need for safe, reliable, cost-effective transportation. Vanpooling survived the gas crises, outlasted regulation, and remains as relevant as ever.

\* Since this article was originally published, MetroPool, Inc. also began offering EasyStreet NY vans for commuters in its New York service area.

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