

## Gas prices nudge Southern California drivers onto mass transit -- slowly



Bob Chamberlin / Los Angeles Times

Bryanne Sykes, 50, a periodic train commuter for 10 years, decided six months ago to take the train from Long Beach to her job in downtown L.A. every day. Her resolve hardened with the increases in gas prices.

**The car habit dies hard, but observers notice train parking lots filling faster and more professionals packing seats for the ride to and from work.**

By Joe Mozingo, Los Angeles Times Staff Writer  
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She thought about it for four years. She wanted to try it, but kept balking.

"I was scared," says Francine Choi, a Los Angeles County employee who lives in Long Beach. "I was worried I'd get mugged." And then a couple months ago, filling her BMW at a Chevron near work, she gasped when she saw the total pass \$60. Then and there, she summoned the courage to do it at last.

Choi rode the Metro Blue Line to work the next day.

"Now I take naps on the way home" says Choi, 45, extolling the light-rail line between downtown L.A. and Long Beach and the \$150 or so she saves by riding it every month.

With gas prices shooting into orbit, mass transit ridership is trending upward -- barely.

Car culture has stubborn roots in Southern California. The vast majority of Southern Californians are holding tenaciously to the privacy and convenience of their own cars, over the crush of humanity on the region's trains and buses.

But longtime riders notice more professionals aboard a system that has mostly served low-income workers who don't have the option to drive.

Now the parking structure at the Willow Street stop in Long Beach is full by 8:30 a.m. -- and spaces used to go empty all day. Some of the riders are not so much new to the system as they are nagged by gas prices to take it more often.

Bryanne Sykes, 50, decided six months ago to take it every day. She parks her Volvo S60 in the spillover parking lot at the Willow station, a good quarter-mile walk to the train.

She scrambles to get a seat on the west side, knowing that the sun beats through the windows on the east side during summer. "You ride and you start strategizing," she says.

Sykes, a student advisor at the Fashion Institute of Design and Merchandising, has been riding the train periodically for 10 years. But the extra half-hour or so it took her to get to and from work in downtown Los Angeles always put her back in her car. When her children were young, she couldn't spare the time. Now, her youngest is in high school and she doesn't need to race home. As gas prices climbed, her resolve hardened.

She saves about \$180 a month in gas, minus the \$62 for a monthly Metro pass.

She loves being able to read the paper and doesn't mind having to park farther away, with all the new riders. In fact, she is elated that she lost 10 pounds walking about three miles a day to and from her stations. And the broader spectrum of riders eases what for some is a stigma -- that the train is full of gangbangers and homeless people.

"The good thing with gas getting more expensive is, more and more people are riding it," says Sykes.

In the past, when she got back to Long Beach about 9 p.m., the lonely walk to her car, down a dark street between the tracks and a park, was eerie. "I would stay on the phone with my husband as I walked," she said.

"In the last month, it's me and 10 other people with briefcases and computers," she says.

Ridership on Metro buses and trains has risen steadily since January, but has yet to surpass the ridership before a rate increase cut passenger numbers last July. Average weekday boardings on Metro buses were 1.12 million in January, and 1.26 million in May, when the last available statistics were taken. But May 2006 saw 1.31 million average weekday boardings.

Light-rail ridership has seen roughly the same trend, albeit on a much smaller scale. The Blue Line has gone from 69,731 average weekday riders in January to 79,291 in May, the Red Line from 124,358 to 141,659, the Gold Line from 19,001 to 23,141.

Passenger levels on Metrolink trains, serving the Antelope Valley and Ventura, Riverside, Orange, and San Bernardino counties, jumped nearly 6% from May to June, and 12% over last year. The 48,046 average weekday boardings in June were the highest ever.

Still, up to 97% of trips in Southern California are in cars, according to the Southern California Assn. of Governments. In the Los Angeles Metro area, which includes northern Orange County, there are about 4.3 million lone drivers commuting every week day, and 600,000 carpooling vehicles.

But as the economy sinks and gas prices continue to rise, transit officials expect more refugees, like Steve Sendor, a commercial real estate broker from Venice.

As the real estate business withered, he couldn't justify driving his gas-swilling Jeep Grand Cherokee to work in Century City. With no rail options, he had no choice but to hop on the workhorse of L.A.'s mass transit system, the bus.

"It's not as inconvenient as I thought," he said. "It adds about 45 minutes of productive time to my day."

He reads documents and business news. And he saves about \$50 a week, he estimates.

Riders' experiences on the buses, of course, vary widely, depending on the route and time of day.

Attorney Susan Seager started taking mass transit from South Pasadena to Century City. She walks to the Gold Line train, takes it Union Station, where she jumps on LADOT Commuter Express to work. "The seats are cushiony and soft," she says "There are no homeless people. There are no screaming children."

But the last Commuter Express leaves Century City at 5:30, and she often has to take a Metro bus down Olympic Boulevard. "It's very bumpy," she said. "Your teeth practically fall out. The other day a woman was hitting her child. We had to get into it, 'Please, don't hit your child.' It's exhausting to ride the Metro bus."

And even on a good day on her beloved train and Commuter Express, the trip takes an hour and 40 minutes -- to go about 20 miles. "What I really hate about the commute is how I don't see my kids," she says.

That minute-to-mile equation is what keeps many people in their cars. Even with traffic jams, driving is usually faster.

Steve Johnson, 61, waited last week for a train at Union Station after shopping in the Fashion District. He said he would love to take mass transit from Simi Valley to South Gate, where he teaches.

One night in 2005, he planned the trip for the next morning. But he realized that his route looked like a circuit board. He'd be taking Metrolink to Union Station, catching the Red Line to the Blue Line, which he'd ride to the Firestone stop, where he would catch a bus to his school.

He would leave his house at 4:45 a.m. and be lucky to get there when school started at 7:30 a.m. He normally left at 6 a.m. and pulled into the school parking lot just after 7.

He decided to put the trip off a day. The train he had considered boarding on that January morning was involved in a massive pileup near Glendale that killed 11 people and injured about 180.

"Somebody up there was trying to tell me something," he said.

Committed to staying in his car, Johnson picks up a car-pooler to cut the cost.

But others find pleasant surprises when they investigate their mass transit options. Richard Covey, a school teacher as well,

discovered an express bus from Laguna Hills to South Coast Plaza that delivers him within walking distance of his middle school in Santa Ana.

He started taking it late March -- and kicks himself for not doing it sooner. The walking invigorates him, and his stress level dropped precipitously. Now he has to set his alarm on his 25-minute ride home so he doesn't sleep right through his stop.

Recently, when he woke up, he looked around at the eight or so other riders.

"I realized that the only ones awake were myself and the bus driver," he said.