

Orlando Sentinel

Thursday, June 3, 2004

Cost-conscious workers leave driving to Lynx

As job rolls grow, many commuters are choosing a bus ticket over expensive fill-ups.

By Scott Powers
SENTINEL STAFF WRITER

Most commuters are grumbling as they pay more at the pump, but \$2-a-gallon gas is leading others to walk away from their cars — and to the nearest bus stop.

"I was like, this is getting a little too much with these gas prices," said Ron Nelson, 31, of Kissimmee, a sales clerk at the Gymboree children's clothing store at Orlando Fashion Square mall. "The prices are really outrageous."

Nelson said he started riding the bus a few weeks ago when he was putting \$30 to \$40 a week into his 1990 Morite Carlo's gas tank to commute about 25 miles each way. Now, he spends \$36 on a monthly bus pass.

Throughout Central Florida, surging gas prices appear to be prompting more commuters to hop on the bus instead of getting behind the wheel.

The number of riders on Lynx, the public bus system in Osceola, Orange and Seminole counties, has grown every month since December, up at least 3 percent and as much as almost 11 percent every month this year compared with the same months in 2003.

The improving economy clearly is playing a role as more folks find work, yet many officials speculate that the rising cost of gas also is

putting more people on buses.

"My guess is it's a one-two punch, with the economy going up, too," said Joe Saviak, Lynx's director of governmental affairs. "But the one of the one-two punch could very well be gas prices going up."

Since the start of the year, gas prices have risen 51 cents a gallon to \$2.028 for regular gas in Florida, a 33 percent increase, according to OPIS Energy Group, a Lakewood, N.J.-based research firm. In the Orlando area, the average price was slightly lower, at \$1.984 on Wednesday.

The increase makes a big difference to many Central Florida residents locked into lower-wage retail and tourism service jobs. Gas prices now are at the point where a 13-mile one-way commute can be cheaper by bus than just the gas in a car that gets 25 miles to the gallon.

At the same time, the local economy is picking up on just about every front, adding 19,900 jobs in April alone, said David Scott, professor of finance at the University of Central Florida.

"The more important factor at Lynx is Central Florida employers are putting people back to work again," Scott said.

He and other economists noted that many of the people going back to work in Orlando are doing so in lower-wage jobs. They are more likely than higher-paid employees to ride buses under any circumstances, but particularly so when bus tickets are cheaper than gas.

"You have to suspect gas prices," said Bob Allsbrook, chief economist at AmSouth Corp.'s Birmingham, Ala., headquarters. "Even \$10 a month matters a whole lot with that economic group."

Nelson, who earns \$7.15 an hour, found the difference between gas and bus costs mattered enough. Of course, like many riders he had to give up other conveniences when taking the bus.

His daily, one-way commute now takes about 90 minutes, including a bus transfer downtown, compared with what was a 30-minute drive. And he complains buses are sometimes late, leading to long waits at hot bus stops.

"Service could be better. It's not an easy way to get to work. In your car you get from point A to point B faster," he said. "But it's a lot cheaper."

Lynx riders who had already given up their cars for buses are smiling more now.

"I can get my Jeep back for about \$300 in repairs, but I'm in no hurry now," said Brad Acker, an electrician who has used buses to commute from his home off Lee Road to various construction sites since before gas prices spiked. "I'm saving about 100 bucks a week between gas and insurance. It makes the day a little longer, but at the end of the day I'm relaxed."

Many other public-transit agencies across the nation also are seeing more riders this year,

PLEASE SEE LYNX, A12

LYNX BUS FARES

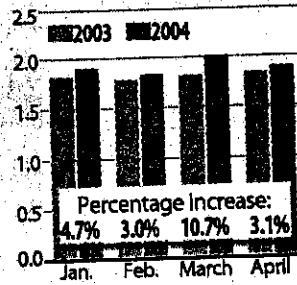
- \$1.25: Standard fare
- \$3: Daily pass
- \$10: Weekly bus pass
- \$36: Monthly bus pass

Students and seniors can receive discount fares. For information, call 407-841-LYNX or log on to golynx.com

BUSES FILLING UP

Lynx has seen increases in the total number of bus boardings every month this year.

Lynx bus ridership In millions of riders



Jan. to April 2003: 7,214,254
 Jan. to April 2004: 7,602,680
 Percentage increase: 5.4%

SOURCE: Lynx

ORLANDO SENTINEL

said Donna Aggazio, spokeswoman for the American Public Transit Association. Her organization is beginning a survey to find out if rising gas prices are playing a role, she said.

"They [gas prices] don't usually go up this high. When they do go up, it's not been enough to change behavior," she said. "We'll have to see this time around."

VOTRAN, Volusia County's bus system, is seeing more bus riders, too, with a 6.9 percent increase in January through April, compared with last year. But VOTRAN officials suspect that may be due more to weather conditions, special events and other factors than to a revolt against gas prices.

"It usually takes a little while," assistant general manager Lois Bollenback said. "They can tolerate the high gas prices for a while before they start giving up their cars."

Most of Lynx's fastest-growing routes serve the attractions areas, suggesting that the new wave of service workers hired there are getting on buses.

Links 50, 56 and 300, which stop at Walt Disney World, and Link 43, which serves SeaWorld and Universal Orlando, are seeing some of the biggest increases in the system.

Several routes serving shopping malls, such as Link 46 to Seminole Towne Center and Link 30, the Colonial Drive Crosstown, also are up more than 10 percent.

Joe Sehie, a disabled former salesman who lives in Colonialtown, said he started riding buses a long time ago, but the gas prices are helping keep him on them now. He said riding buses requires a change in attitude.

"You need to learn to be patient," Sehie said.