

Commuters embrace transit options

Posted on Feb. 17, 2010 by Anne Laker

Eight thousand alternative transit riders can't be wrong

"I wouldn't say I'm a huge treehugger," says Andrea Riechard, 43, who works at a downtown law firm and lives in Plainfield. "I recycle and use those compact light bulbs." But every day Riechard reduces air pollution in Central Indiana, removing one tenth of a pound of pollution with every mile she travels. Her courageous, planet-saving act?

Carpooling.

Riechard and her mother, Westside resident Sandi Thompson, have been carpooling for years. By avoiding downtown parking fees and the full brunt of gas costs, Sandi and Andrea save an estimated \$100 a month. "We started doing it out of convenience," says Riechard.

Hoosiers, like all Americans, covet convenience. That's where Central Indiana Commuter Services (CICS) comes in. CICS is a federally funded program set up by IndyGo in 2004 to reduce traffic congestion and air pollution — by making alternative transportation options as convenient as possible.

"Carpooling, vanpooling, riding transit, biking and walking — all of these are considered alternative transportation options," says Anita Beverly, CICS Project Manager. CICS keeps a database of over 8,000 Indy residents who use alternative forms of transportation, including 1,974 carpoolers and 100 walkers, as of last month.

For carpoolers, CICS provides a dating service of sorts, generating a confidential list of potential carpool mates within three miles of your home and one mile of your workplace. "If everyone carpoled once a week," says Beverly, "[Indianapolis] would not have a pollution problem." As of 2008, Indianapolis ranked 40th out of the 50 largest U.S. cities in terms of air quality (SustainLane.com).

CICS saw a spike in demand for transit alternatives two years ago when gas hit \$4 a gallon. "That's the pain point that motivates people to seek alternatives to solo car ridership," says Beverly. "Saving money is the biggest incentive for ride sharing — carpooling can cut your costs in half."

Diving into the vanpool

Curt Witteveen's commuting cost plummeted three years ago when he joined a CICS-supported vanpool from Bloomington to Indy. Driving alone, the 43-year-old public library staffer's monthly commute cost would be \$560 (including built-in costs of



Anita Beverly is CICS Project Manager.

Photo by Mariah White -

insurance, maintenance, etc). With vanpooling, it's \$185, tops. The 10 vanpool members split the cost of the van lease, plus gas costs. The vanpoolers get to nap, chat, eat or work during the ride. "It can be social but it's often restful," says Witteveen. While the vanpool logistics add a little extra time to his commute, Witteveen cites environmental concerns as a prime motivator for his participation. "It makes me feel good to know that when we have a full van, there are nine fewer cars on the road."

CICS measures success by calculating the number of vehicle miles not traveled as a result of alternative transportation. On an average day in 2009, alternative transit participants reduced car travel by 70,164 miles. Beverly insists that alternative transit is not an all-or-nothing prospect. "Your transit has to fit your lifestyle," she says. "Maybe you can only carpool or bike to work once a week. But it makes a difference."

Transit users who register as commuters with CICS can take advantage of the Emergency Ride Home (ERH) program. CICS gives free taxi rides to registered commuters in case of an unplanned need to leave work at an odd time, due to a sick child or unexpected overtime, for example. For a person to qualify for ERH, his or her employer must be a member of CICS.

Right now 362 Central Indiana employers are CICS participating companies, including Lilly and Clarian. [Editors note: NUVO recently became a participating company in CICS.] Laura Miller, personnel administrator at Barnes & Thornburg LLP, says her company's participation "was a decision we made to be environmentally responsible." Sixty-five B&T staffers use alternative forms of transit to get to work.

Riding high on IndyGo

Carl Basile, a San Francisco to Indy transplant, relies on IndyGo for his daily commute from Broad Ripple to downtown. "My experience using IndyGo has overall been a positive one," says Basile. "The buses are clean, the drivers are friendly, and the atmosphere is pretty safe."

Basile notes the difference between Indy's transit system and San Francisco's — the IndyGo system is not comprehensive, but it does the job of getting riders downtown. While he regrets that transfers aren't available on IndyGo, he embraces the advantages: "I like to be able to relax and read on the way to work," Basile says. "I've even used the time to get some work done ... I also like being more eco-friendly."

IndyGo's latest upgrade is the Trip Planner. At IndyGo's website, enter your origin, destination, timing, and the app plans your route. IndyGo hopes to unveil a text-message tool this year, so riders can get real-time data on the location of a bus en route. Says IndyGo spokesperson Jenny Brown: "The bus system is not just for commuting ... take your kids for a ride on the weekend and make a day of it."

Reichard, Witteveen, Basile and Beverly concur: alternative transit is worth a try, at least once, for anyone. "The only way that people are going to eliminate their prejudices about anything, whether it is riding the bus or trying a new food, is to try it for themselves," says Basile. Eight thousand CICS-registered alternative transit riders can't be wrong, and Indy's air quality may be the biggest winner.

SIDEBAR: Indy's transit options

Carpool: Use CICS' online database to connect with carpoolers who live and work near you. Also try the Commute Cost Calculator: enter your round trip mileage to work, average mpg, and the price of gas — and see the cost of your commute per day, month and year.

Vanpool: Have a daily commute from a distant suburb or town? CICS will help you organize a new vanpool, or join an existing one. Current active vanpools: Bloomington to Indy, Cloverdale to Indy, and Greenwood to Indy's northeast side.

Light Rail: Indy does have one light rail line – it's a well-kept secret called the Clarian People Mover and it travels 1.4 miles, from the Methodist Hospital Complex at 16th & Capitol to Riley Hospital in the heart of IUPUI's campus. Built for medical staff but free to the public, the electric, driverless CPM runs 24/7. Not a bad option for getting to events at IUPUI.

Bus: IndyGo offers 28 fixed route bus lines. Bus passes are \$60 per month for unlimited rides, \$4 for a day pass, or \$1.75 cash for a one-way ride. There's also a downtown circulator called the Red Line, and an express airport shuttle known as the Green Line, for \$7. IndyGo Commuter Express offers two routes – Carmel to Indy and Fishers to Indy.

Biking: To cyclists' delight, bike lanes bloomed all over Indy last year, not to mention the quickly progressing Cultural Trail. The latest electric bikes (priced at around \$2,500) make commuting a breeze. Joe Cox of Joe's Cycles in Fountain Square, dealer of traditional and electric bikes, says: "There's more hope than ever for bikers in Indy."

Walking: If your commute is 4 miles or less, try pedestrianism: it allows you to see your city with fresh eyes, and the commute metamorphosizes into a workout.

Watercraft: Put your kayak in at River Crossing, and paddle down the White River to West 16th St.

Car Sharing Service: IU Bloomington announced the launch of Zipcar car sharing program on campus this month, in which students pay \$35 per year (plus per hour or per day fees) to use one of four cars on an as-needed basis. In Indy, the nonprofit group People for Urban Progress is analyzing the feasibility of a program in Indianapolis.

Visit www.cirta.us and www.327ride.net for more info on Central Indiana Transit Options.