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COMPANY CAR POOLS SEEM HERE TO STAY

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MATRIMONY was an unexpected result of the 3M Corporation's employee ride-sharing program. Two recently widowed employees of the giant Minnesota company met, became friends and eventually married through their van-pooling group.

When it began the program in 1973, however, the Minnesota Mining and Manufacturing Company had a less romantic goal: to reduce traffic and parking problems at the 3M Center in St. Paul. With more than 10,000 employees reporting to work there, a \$3 million new parking facility seemed the only answer.

As the ride-sharing program caught on, though, the need for more parking space became less urgent, and the plan was eventually scrapped. Now, in the program's ninth year, 3M has some 145 vans in operation, transporting more than 1,500 employees from home to work and back each day, and it hopes to expand to 160 vans by the end of the year .

Since the Arab oil embargo of 1973-74, as gasoline prices have steadily risen and the Federal Government has stepped up its plea for energy conservation, some 350 to 500 private corporations have jumped headfirst into ride-sharing.

According to Barbara Reichart, chief of ride-sharing for the Department of Transportation's Federal Highway Administration, the Government spent \$1 million last year to promote and assist in the development of substantive nationwide ride-sharing efforts - with an investment-tax credit offered to employers who sponsor such programs - and it plans to spend about the same amount this year.

In addition, she said, since 1974 some \$90 million has been spent in Federal highway funds to enable states and municipalities to implement programs at the local level.

The Transportation Department's National Ride Sharing Information Center, based in Washington, provides a toll-free information and referral service for those interested in starting or getting into a pool, and, according to a spokesman, sometimes receives as many as 60 to 75 calls a day. For information, call (800) 424-9184.

According to the latest estimates by the Government-sponsored National Task Force on Ride Sharing, based on 1975 census figures, some 16 million Americans, or 20 percent of all who commute by some vehicle, get to work by car and van pools, compared with about 5 million using public transit and 52 million driving alone. The Government hopes to double that 20 percent by 1985.

"We do know that ride-sharing is the new way to go," Miss Reichart said, "and the greatest growth has been at the private employer level."

Conoco, the large oil company, started a small van-pool program in March 1975 and now operates 206 vans, with 23 more on order, between locations from small division offices to tiny villages to major refinery sites to its main operations office.

"We've been very high on ride-sharing since we recognized its potential to conserve energy," said William R. Fortune, Conoco's manager of special projects. "In Houston, about 42 percent of our employees are van-pooling, with an additional 26 percent in carpooling. In Denver, we have 47 percent van-pooling, and at one location we have 85 percent.

"It does more than conserve energy. One 12-passenger van has the potential to eliminate 11 automobiles from the road. On an average 50-mile round trip per day, that's seven tons of pollution eliminated from the atmosphere each year. It also reduces traffic congestion and the need for auto-related facilities."

Conoco's ride-sharing employees pay about \$31 a month for an average 50-mile daily round trip, with the driver riding for free. On average, according to Ed Marks, executive director of the National Association of Van Pool Operators, across-the-board costs to vanpoolers amount to about 4 cents per mile, compared to current estimates of about 21 cents a mile for an individual operating a subcompact car.

A recent study by the Hertz Corporation, which is actively promoting the leasing of vans for ride-sharing groups, estimated that a 15-passenger van could cut commuting costs by 88 percent, or about \$2,800 per person annually. The study said United States oil imports would drop by 5.5 billion gallons a year if one worker in 10 abandoned lone driving for a car or van pool.

Some of the major corporations involved in employee van-pooling are the Westinghouse Electric Corporation, RCA Corporation, Federal Express Corporation, Allstate Insurance Company, Nabisco, General Mills, the Prudential Insurance Company of America, Montgomery Ward & Company and the Chrysler Corporation.

In typical cases, employees pay a prorated monthly fee covering gasoline, insurance and maintenance, based on the number of miles traveled. The driver, who has responsibility for the upkeep of the car, rides free and has the use of the van on weekends.

"It's a program that appeals to everybody," said Robert B. Heath of Chrysler, which now operates 160 vans, carrying about 1,700 employees. "Most of the people in our program have stayed in it for a long time."

"It's really not anything that has to be sold," said Mr. Marks of the Knoxville, Tenn.-based van pool operators group, which was founded in 1977 and has 417 members. "It's gotten to the point where it sells itself," he said. The benefits are just so obvious to everybody."

Illustrations: photos

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