

# Sharing the Ride

Published in the Wednesday, Jan. 21 2009 edition of  
the Chesterfield Journal. By Mary Shapiro.

SUBURBAN  
JOURNALS

**J**oan Zehner, who lives in west St. Louis County near Valley Park, meets Michelle Bice of Fenton every weekday morning from 6:45 to 7 a.m.

But it's not for a run or a cup of coffee.

The pair met about three or four years ago, because they work together in the same department at CitiMortgage in O'Fallon, Mo. They also started participating about a year ago in RideFinders, a regional ride-share program, and carpool together to and from work.

They usually alternate drivers every day on the drive of about 25 or 30 minutes going to O'Fallon and at least 35 minutes coming home (because of the traffic), Bice said.

Zehner said she enjoys being a passenger every other day.

"And we save an unbelievable amount of money on gas when each of us only has to fill up the tank every two weeks," she said.

"Because we're part of RideFinders, through a company policy, we have special parking places that let us park close to the door," she said. "In cold or rainy or snowy weather, that's important because we work at a big place with a huge parking lot."

And it's nice to have someone to talk to on the ride, "to make the time just zip by," Zehner said.

Bice agreed.

"It's awesome to have a front row parking spot and taxi rides home if one of us has to stay late, through RideFinders," she said.

Nearly 1,500 participating employers in RideFinders get limited free taxi rides home for their employees through the agency's "Guaranteed Ride Home" program, agency officials said.



Michelle Bice, left, of Fenton, and Joan Zehner of West County carpool to work through the RideFinders ridesharing program. — Rick Graefe Photo

"We found out about RideFinders through our employer, who said if we signed up we could get the special space, and at that time, a gas card," Bice said.

"We're saving money. It's certainly worth it to be in the program. I used to fill up my tank more than once a week, but not anymore. Hopefully, more people will join up."

One of those who has is Larry Baner, who regularly carpools from his home in Wildwood to Nestle Purina in St. Louis along with co-employee Ron Bailey of Eureka.

Baner said his company participates in and encourages RideFinders membership.

"We started carpooling more than a year ago," he said, adding his trip is 40 minutes each way door to door.

"Carpooling makes it easier. It's less stress if you don't have to drive each day, to kick back if you're tired - I've fallen asleep a couple of times in the car. The other thing is, Ron is a friend, and you can solve the world's problems on the way back and forth."

Not to mention saving money.

Baner said each of them saves about half of the weekly gas expenses for their fuel-efficient cars, coming to about five gallons of gas saved per week per person.

"The other thing that motivated us both is concern about the environment, and this seemed like the right thing to do," Baner said.

"Carpooling helps with dependence on foreign oil - there is a multitude of reasons this is a good idea."

Bailey added the benefits include having someone to talk to while traveling to and from work, in addition to the savings in gas.

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“It’s the only way you have an opportunity to set prices on fuel,” he said. “It’s a very little thing, but it’s a way to effect change and it makes a difference if everybody does it.

“I think people found it wasn’t that difficult to carpool when gas prices were over \$4 a gallon, and even now, I don’t have any intention of changing,” he said. “Carpooling puts less wear and tear on your automobile.”

Zehner, Bice, Baner and Bailey are part of a record number of people in the St. Louis region who have discovered relief at the gas pump by sharing the ride to work with other commuters through RideFinders.

That agency’s growth in fiscal year 2008 was three times greater than in any previous year, said Joe Wright, director of RideFinders.

Concerns about the effects of rising gas prices on their employees also prompted more than 400 employers to join RideFinders in the agency’s 2008 fiscal year, to help their employees share rides, he said.

This indicates that ride-sharing is quickly emerging as a commuting alternative of choice that complements the region’s public transit system, he said.

RideFinders makes it easy for commuters to carpool using their personal vehicles or vanpool using vans provided by RideFinders for a monthly fare, he said.

Commuters first register with RideFinders’ free ride-matching service at [www.ridefinders.org](http://www.ridefinders.org) or **1-800-847-7433**, providing their home and work addresses, work hours and preferences.

Next, commuters receive a contact list of other commuters or vanpools with similar commutes to theirs. Once they decide to carpool or vanpool, they can register with RideFinders for free to receive the Guaranteed Ride Home benefit.

“Ride-sharing is a particularly viable alternative for the more than 40 percent of our carpoolers who live in outlying communities not currently served by public transit, which includes west St. Louis County, especially, when Metro service reductions take effect,” Wright said.

“We’ve had a lot of good response from West County residents. Many may have taken an express bus to downtown St. Louis, and some of them are starting to consider other alternatives. We certainly want to be another way to help people get to work.”

## More about RideFinders

RideFinders, a regional ride-sharing program, is a free public service that was created by Madison County Transit, which has operated it since 1994.

It serves commuters who work in St. Louis and the counties of St. Louis, St. Charles, Jefferson and Franklin in Missouri and Madison, St. Clair and Monroe in Illinois.



It receives federal grant funding from the U.S. Department of Transportation and the Federal Highway Administration.

The program provides a free ride-matching service to help more than 9,000 commuters carpool or vanpool to work, and by partnering with almost 1,500 employers, provides free ride-sharing information and incentives to commuters.

During the agency’s fiscal year of July 2007 to June 2008, RideFinders topped 9,000 participating commuters, a net increase of nearly 3,000, or 43 percent, compared to its previous fiscal year, officials said.

In turn, these commuters shared the ride to and from work for almost 4 million passenger trips, an increase of 1 million trips, or 32 percent, compared to the previous fiscal year.

By sharing the ride to work, commuters saved more than \$25 million annually in gas and other commuting costs, officials said.

And the entire region benefits from ride-sharing as 60 million driving miles and 2 million pounds of air pollution are eliminated, officials said.

Employers interested in joining RideFinders at no cost can e-mail [ridefinders@mct.org](mailto:ridefinders@mct.org).

Employers and area residents wanting more information can visit the website [www.ridefinders.org](http://www.ridefinders.org) or call **1-800-847-7433**.

