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Rideshare Rolls On Despite Challenges

By Gregory Seay

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Yesterday

Ever since commuters began packing into its vans during the mid-1990s, Rideshare Inc. has had one goal.

“Our mission is to get single-occupancy vehicles off the road,” said Jon Colman, chief executive officer of the state’s largest private transit operator based in Windsor.

Lately, Rideshare — its white Easy Street vans with the curvy purple-gold-and-green (being replaced with green-and-blue) logos visible on almost every road and parking lot in Connecticut, New York, Massachusetts and Rhode Island — has encountered an ironic threat to developing its shared-commuting model. The same economy that is pushing solo drivers into Rideshare pools has taken jobs away from an almost equal number of riders — challenging the nonprofit to keep its vans and routes operating efficiently.



Rideshare Inc. vans parked off Interstate 91 in Windsor are among its 600 vehicles operated daily in four states by the nonprofit commuter and transportation service.

That pressure could intensify, as the state begins work on a bus transitway linking New Britain’s central hub to downtown Hartford. Most recently, Gov. M. Jodi Rell has lent her voice to enhancing rail service from New Haven to Hartford to Springfield to lighten traffic and reduce pollution from automobile exhaust.

Ridership growth has been flat the past year, Colman said, as demand caused by the rollercoaster spike in motor fuel prices was offset by commuters lured back to driving solo by gas prices below \$3 a gallon or more full-efficient, hybrid internal combustion-electric autos.

To curb defections, Rideshare’s Easy Street vanpool on Jan. 1 rolled back fares by 15 percent six months after raising them 21 percent to cover fuel prices it had projected to stay above last summer’s \$4 a gallon. Plans are to keep the typical Easy Street fare of \$130 monthly covering about 85 miles roundtrip level through June 30, 2010.



Extended Turf

Rideshare's turf extends beyond Connecticut. Averaging 5,000 commuters, 600 vans covering hundreds of routes in Connecticut, Massachusetts, Rhode Island and New York's Long Island and Westchester County, its Easy Street program ranks with other large U.S. vanpools such as Seattle, Wash.; Chicago; and Phoenix, Ariz., commuter experts say.



Jon Colman, chief executive officer, Rideshare Inc., Windsor.

Fares and fees from its core vanpool operation totaled \$6.7 million in the fiscal year ended June 30, 2008, up from \$6 million a year earlier, federal tax filings show.

"They're one of the more creative programs that's been rolled out," said Philip Winters, who for a decade managed a vanpool program in Richmond, Va., and now directs the University of South Florida's Center for Urban Transportation Research.

Vanpooling — essentially carpools with larger six- or nine-passenger vehicles — traces its roots to the second oil crisis of the late 1970s. In suburban Detroit, a group of Chrysler volunteers set up a commuter service to ferry colleagues to and from their auto jobs. So successful was the program, Chrysler later spun it off as Van Pool Services Inc., known today as VPSI, the nation's largest operator. Begun in 1995, Easy Street is a copy of that service.

Operate Efficiently

Vanpooling's benefits, supporters say, are that it reduces traffic congestion and air pollution by taking vehicles off the road, while curbing the nation's energy thirst. Unlike buses and rail, vanpools operate more efficiently — as high as 85 percent to 90 percent — because their seats are typically full, supporters add.

Van and car pools, too, are more accessible because their riders determine the travel routes and schedules. Moreover, passengers spend time getting to know each other.

That doesn't mean, however, it's all easy street, observers say.

"It's a challenging business to be in," said Winters. "There are so many issues that go into getting people to ride together."

Some operators, such as VPSI, will assign a van once a group of riders has gotten together to create their own commuter pool.

Matching Riders

But there is a down side.

A vanpool route can collapse quickly if one rider drops out, creating a domino effect as remaining passengers are burdened with the extra cost to run the van. In other cases, the operator often will shut down a route if it falls below a minimum number of riders.

Rideshare, on the other hand, serves as a broker, matching riders with the most suitable commuting pools. It, too, shoulders the burden for replacing dropouts.

Kathy Seitz has been a vanpool commuter since 1986, when the vanpool was being run by the state. Seitz pays \$154 a month to commute weekdays in a 12-passenger van from her Norwich home to Hartford's 55 Elm St., where she works as an administrative assistant in the attorney general's office. During her hour-long, 46-mile journey, she reads, catnaps or chats with fellow passengers, most of them also state workers.

"It's the ease and comfort of not being behind the wheel," she said.

Bryan Chnowski, 35, started on June 1 as an Easy Street commuter from his Brookfield hometown to downtown Hartford, where he works as a data information security analyst for Travelers Cos. Chnowski's \$142 monthly Easy Street fare is far less than the \$225 a week he estimates it would cost to fuel and park his Jeep Wrangler.

Immeasurable Savings

He shares his 50-minute ride into downtown in a 12-passenger van with seven other riders, including three others who work for Travelers, from their rendezvous point in a commuter lot on Interstate 84.

Aside from the money, Chnowski says is the immeasurable savings in physical and mental wear and tear from not being behind the wheel daily. He says he plenty of energy when he gets home to spend time with his two young children.

"I'm really happy to get the time back," Chnowski said.

Chnowski and Seitz say their employers have made it easier for them to use Easy Street by allowing them to coordinate their work and commuter schedules.

At Aetna Inc., one in every six of its Hartford workers participates in its public transportation subsidy program — a ratio that has grown sharply in recent years, said Mike Marshall, head of asset management.

One reason, said Marshall, who previously represented Aetna on Rideshare's board, may

be that Aetna now charges employees to park. The insurer also encourages more of its workers to do their tasks from home.

In addition to its vanpool service, Rideshare also serves as a clearinghouse for the state's information network of commuter options and services, which include bus and rail, said Jim Stutz, transportation supervising planner for the state Department of Transportation.

One of those services, Newride.com, is an online match for commuters looking to share a ride.

Stutz said commuter response to these services spiked when gasoline reached \$4 a gallon in summer 2008. Since then, however, demand has fallen with fuel prices and as more job seekers incorporate the availability of commuting option into their searches, he said.

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