

Emphasis on fuel efficiency

Companies find ways to reduce gasoline costs

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When Donna Namath leaves Kenosha, Wis., at 6:15 a.m. every weekday to travel to her job at Baxter International in Deerfield, she is not too worried about gasoline prices.

As the national average for gasoline reached a record high Tuesday, Namath leans back and relaxes while the Pace van she shares with five others travels more than 30 miles south on I-94.

She pays roughly \$50 a month to share a ride, which ordinarily would cost her roughly \$200 a month if she drove her own car.

"It's all about the love affair between people and their cars and whether they can get comfortable being without their car all the time," said Namath, a senior manager of work life and community relations.

The Pace van is subsidized in part by Baxter, just one of many ways local companies are helping employees ease the burden of soaring gasoline prices.

Besides car pooling, mileage reimbursement ranging from 40.5 cents to 50.5 cents per mile, work-at-home programs and other initiatives also help.

"As a company, we're all doing quite a bit to help our workers and the environment," Baxter spokeswoman Elaine Salewske said.

Baxter also offers up to \$60 per month reimbursement for taking Metra or other public transportation, free shuttle service from depots to the office, job-sharing, telecommuting and flex-time to help workers ease the crunch.

Schaumburg-based Motorola Inc. also offers similar services and benefits.

Workers are facing one of their most challenging economies in many years: foreclosures and personal bankruptcies are soaring, and food and other expenses have been increasing just as a recession looms.

So to be hit in the gas tank isn't altogether unexpected, but it's hard to see the national average hit a record high of \$3.227 Tuesday. Last May, the record was \$3.226.

Some Chicago suburban stations posted \$3.45 per gallon for regular and \$4.19 for diesel.

The city of Chicago was \$3.30, compared to last year at \$3.66, according to Beth Mosher, spokeswoman for AAA of Chicago, based in Aurora.

"There likely will be another record set (today) and the next day," said Mosher. "Oil prices have been very high and there's no secret that the economy is weak. We don't see a clear end in sight."

Last May, the Chicago area saw a record high when some refineries serving the Midwest had temporarily closed down because of fires or other reasons. That's not the case this year, said David Sykuta, executive director of the Illinois Petroleum Council in Springfield.

A weak dollar overseas, stronger demand in China and India, crude oil being traded by more hedge funds and the fear factor of terrorism in oil-producing countries have all wreaked havoc on oil prices, Sykuta said.

And most of all, crude oil reached \$109.72 a barrel in trading Tuesday, pushing hard toward \$110.

"This time of year should have lower prices, but they aren't," said Sykuta. "And they could go up higher by summer because of the new blends used to fight pollution."

Rising prices have become a fact of life, something that is being considered by many companies, including Naperville-based Tellabs Inc.

Tellabs offers mileage reimbursement and work-at home programs. It also might consider other options in the future, spokesman George Stenitzer said.

"We tend to be flexible about it, department by department," said Stenitzer. "Would we have more programs? Possibly a year from now. We've been looking at our carbon footprint."

AT&T, which has its Midwest headquarters in Hoffman Estates, has a few high-tech ways of managing their fuel costs, spokeswoman Meghan Roskopf said.

AT&T operates a fleet control Web site where supervisors can monitor fueling activity. A new monthly report allows them to identify what their drivers have paid for fuel, compared to other drivers in the same area, across a zip code for example.

In addition, AT&T has a Daily Best Price tool that allows a driver to access the system from the road, type in the zip code, and get the cheapest gas prices within seven minutes of their location, Roskopf said.

Naperville-based Jackson Moving and Storage has seen its operating expense increase roughly 15 percent due to higher fuel costs, said spokesman Brandon Capshaw.

"Depending on usage, all sales people and drivers get reimbursed through car allowances, gas cards and direct reimbursement," Capshaw said.

The reimbursements help a lot, said Namath, who receives a discount for her van ride because she's a back-up driver trained by Pace. But the best benefit of all doesn't come in the form of money.

"I can do other things," she said, "rather than deal with traffic issues."