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## N.O. residents find creative ways to tighten their belts while struggling to cope with the spike in gasoline prices

Posted by [Sheryl Kennedy, The Times-Picayune](#) July 28, 2008 7:33PM



Michael DeMocker/The Times-Picayune

Gary Smith of New Orleans is cutting down on his gas consumption by using electric chain saws, blowers, trimmers, and lawn mowers, and driving a Toyota Camry Hybrid. He is one of thousands of residents in the metro area who are redefining how they live to better manage the cost of gas.

Gary Smith was looking for a reason. The perfect excuse to make a change that would redefine how he lives.

"In the old days, a year ago, I wouldn't hesitate to drive across town for one item. Now, I wait until I need a number of things before making the trek," said Smith, 50, a local author. "I was looking for an excuse to change my lifestyle."

"The high price of gas has forced me to change the way I do everything from grocery shopping to sticking with my queen-sized bed instead of upgrading to a king-sized bed. It's just plain wasteful to buy all those new sheets when the old ones are just fine," he said.

Smith is one of thousands of Greater New Orleans residents redefining how they

live to better manage the cost of gas. Whether it be rethinking trips to the grocery store or the commute to the office, creative belt-tightening seems to be a priority on everyone's summer-to-do list.

AAA Louisiana surveyed 600 of its members in the spring about high gas prices when prices were about \$3.20 a gallon. About 54 percent already had made significant changes, another 10 percent said they would make changes once the price reached \$3.50 a gallon, and 13 percent said they would make changes once prices were \$4 a gallon.

"So if we look at these numbers, we know that 77 percent have already made significant changes," said Don Redman, spokesman with AAA Louisiana. They defined significant as fewer or shorter luxury trips, buying a more fuel-efficient vehicle, walking or riding a bike, using mass transit, carpooling or moving closer to work.

"It's not surprising people are thinking creatively and trying to be proactive. However, we are concerned with people who are going overboard to conserve gas. Some are putting their cars in neutral or trailing semis to improve mileage. All these things are dangerous," Redman said.

Before the prices at the pump soared to about \$4 a gallon, Smith knew he needed to curb his penchant for weekly sojourns to Whole Foods for specialty items and permanently sideline his 2000 Jeep Grand Cherokee.

So in the fall of 2006, he bought a Camry Hybrid after noticing a spike at the pump. It made a difference.

Instead of paying \$55 every two weeks to fill up his tank, Smith spends \$55 filling up his hybrid once a month and drives on average 14 miles a day.

Smith, a Riverbend resident who has been taking full advantage of walking-distance conveniences from his home such as the Carrollton streetcar, limits his trips to Whole Foods to once a month, only buys items there that are not available in other nearby grocery stores, and he spends more time pricing items so he makes prudent use of his gas.

As a stay-at-home mother, Danielle Dukes thought she was being smart about purchases and consumption, but recently had to eliminate her family's weekly visits to her parents' house in eastern New Orleans because of the escalating price of gas.

"We chose to live in Algiers Point because it is a self-contained neighborhood and it would reduce our need to drive everywhere," said Dukes, 31, a mom of five children who range in age from 1-year-old twins to an 8-year-old son. "But that was before the prices went up to \$4 a gallon. So I'm thankful we live close to certain places because I don't see the price of gas going down again."

Since Dukes has a large, young family, she also doesn't see downgrading to a subcompact as an option. She and her husband also have decided to homeschool their children, so the city is their classroom. But now weekly trips to explore nature at City Park, enjoy the hands-on exhibits at the Louisiana Children's Museum, or study animal science firsthand at the Audobon Zoo will be reserved for special occasions.

Dukes' gas-saving strategy is to only budget \$60 a week to fill up her 14-gallon Chrysler Town and Country minivan and to sit down and decide where that tank can take them for the week.

"And when it's gone, it's gone and we are staying at home," she said.

Kate Parker, 32, believes surging gas prices haven't been all bad.

"I'm now buying produce in season at the local farmer's market at the American Can Company in Mid-City," said Parker, a Tulane University staff member. "I'm also building new relationships with the people at the farmer's market and finding out about what fruits and vegetables are in season. I'm not sure if I would have taken advantage of this if I wasn't forced to rethink my habits."

Parker also has stopped visiting the local movie store. Instead, she uses a mail order service to reduce gas usage. In another cost-cutting move, she has parked her Subaru Outback in favor of a customized bike that she rides to and from work.

"When my husband and I honeymooned in France, I noticed that the women rode bikes with skirts and looked good doing it," Parker said. "So he built me a bike that's upright, has a larger basket, has headlights and allows me to bike in heels."

These changes have cut Parker's monthly gas consumption in half. She's saving \$55 in gas a month and \$35 in parking fees.