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Wheels

The Nuts and Bolts of Whatever Moves You

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Lower Gas Prices Are Not Increasing Driving

By *JIM MOTAVALLI*

Charles Rex Arbogast/Associated Press Traffic in Chicago.

The news isn't that we're driving less — vehicle miles traveled, also known as V.M.T., has been declining for 13 straight months. In December, the country's V.M.T. [was down 1.6 percent](#) (compared to the same month last year), which translates to 3.8 billion miles not traveled.

But the interesting question is why we're driving less, with gas costing less than half what it did last June (when prices reached \$4 a gallon, [according to AAA, the automobile association](#)). It's anecdotal, but available evidence suggests that the recession is a prime factor.

Doug Hecox, a spokesman for the Federal Highway Administration, said what started as a reaction to high gas prices “may have morphed into something else.”

The F.H.A. has thousands of traffic sensors in place on roadways around the United States, said Mr. Hecox, and all show a declining trend in driving.

“Sadly, they aren't mind-readers,” he said in an e-mail message. “When the decline in American driving was first identified in late 2007, fuel prices were beginning to increase. The prevailing wisdom at the time was that the drop was due to increased fuel prices.”

He added: “However, as fuel prices began to fall last August and September, American driving didn't respond. Of course, our nation was struck by financial crisis in mid-September, which may have become a new factor in the decline.”

The recession is probably a factor in public transit use, too. Rose Sheridan, a vice president at the American Public Transportation Association, said that transit ridership grew by rates ranging from 3.42 to 6.52 percent in each of the first three quarters of 2008, but growth slowed to only 1.68 percent in the fourth quarter. “We thought we might see a decline in the last quarter because of the loss of millions of jobs, but instead we saw only a slowing in the rate of growth,” she said.

The association said that 58 percent of the people who take mass transit are going to work, so higher unemployment numbers could result in some ridership shrinkage. Or maybe not. “We think that many people who have recently taken public transit for the first time realize how much money they're saving,” Ms. Sheridan said. “And so many of

them have stuck with transit.”

The agency estimates, based on March gas prices, that the average commuter can save \$8,500 a year by using transit instead of driving to work. Despite that, Mr. Hecox said Americans were likely to get back in their cars when the recession ends. “When people have a job to go to,” he said, “the decline in American driving may fade into the nation’s rear-view mirror.”

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