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More people depending on public transportation

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Valley Metro bus

The nation's public transportation systems saw the largest quarterly ridership increase in 25 years as more Americans shunned their automobiles even as gas prices began to ease, according to industry figures to be released Monday.

Subways, buses, commuter rail and light-rail systems saw a 6.5 percent jump in ridership from July to September, according to the Washington-based American Public Transportation Association. During the same quarter, Americans drove 4.6 percent less on the nation's highways.

The average price for a gallon of gas peaked at more than \$4 in mid-July, then began falling.

"They may have tried public transportation to get away from high gas prices, but many have since found it works for them," association president William W. Millar said. "I think

this year has been a real turning point for the public's attitude toward public transportation."

The real test, however, could be reflected in the coming months; gas prices recently plunged below \$2 a gallon nationwide for the first time since 2005.

Riders made 2.85 billion trips on public transportation during the third quarter, up from 2.67 billion trips a year ago. There have been gains in every quarter this year from 2007. Last year's 10.3 billion trips were the most on public transportation in 50 years.

Amtrak also is seeing growth, with ridership across the country up 11 percent from July to September, according to spokeswoman Karina Romero.

The gains come as more Americans stay off the roads. The Federal Highway Administration has reported 11 consecutive months of a decline in driving.

Meanwhile, the U.S. auto industry is on the verge of collapse as vehicle sales plummet. Sales in September dropped below 1 million for the first time in 15 years and continued to decline in October and November.

Stephen Hilliard, of Oxon Hill, Md., is among those leaving his car at home. Hilliard said he started taking the subway to his job in Washington because of high gas prices, but quickly realized that public transportation was saving him money even as the cost of fuel dropped.

"Driving to work is \$30 a day when it comes to parking and paying for gas," Hilliard said. The same trip on the subway only sets him back about \$8.

Some of the largest third-quarter ridership gains came in the southwest. Bus ridership in Phoenix climbed more than 15 percent. The Orange County Transportation Authority in California saw its bus ridership soar by nearly 24 percent. The agency has continued to see big gains in the fourth quarter, reporting 6.3 million bus boardings in October, the highest in its history.

"I think it's really a sign that even as gas prices drop people are looking for ways to save money in this difficult economic environment," spokesman Joel Zlotnik said.

Light rail, which includes modern streetcars and trolleys, saw the highest percentage increase with double-digit growth in nine regions, including Baltimore, Minneapolis and Dallas.

To welcome thousands of new riders, Dallas Area Rapid Transit has launched a Web page that provides novices with "six easy steps" to using the bus or rail, spokesman Morgan Lyons said. The transit agency also has launched a campaign to ease parking congestion, urging riders to car pool to rail stations or park at less

popular stops.

Growing ridership comes as transit systems grapple with tighter budgets amid the economic slowdown.

For many agencies, having more fare-paying customers isn't enough to offset operating costs. In New York, for example, the Metropolitan Transportation Authority said it needs to raise fare revenue by 23 percent by June to plug a budget gap.

At the same time, transportation agencies are facing the collapse of long-term financing deals with investors, which could leave them on the hook for billions of dollars.

"It's a real conundrum," said Millar, who is calling for an economic stimulus package that includes an investment in public transit. "We're glad to have new customers, but we have all these challenges." He said additional money could be used for basic infrastructure improvements such as more park-and-ride lots, buses and trains. Copyright 2008 The E.W. Scripps Co. All rights reserved. This material may not be published, broadcast, rewritten, or redistributed.

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