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## Riding a Bike to Work

# With Increasing Gas Prices, Bicycles Quickly Becoming More Popular

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When Robert Tucker commutes between his two businesses on South Florida Avenue, he doesn't use a car.

When he takes his girlfriend out to dinner on a Friday night, the trip requires no gasoline.

Tucker, 34, is among a growing number of people who, for various reasons, have parked their cars and opted for a more fuel-efficient, athletic and environmentally friendly mode of transportation - the good ol' bicycle.

"I've got a pretty nice car," Tucker said. "I have a Cadillac, but I give (my girlfriend) the option of riding in the car," and she often chooses the bike.

In fact, Tucker has four cars.

"But I just like to ride my bicycle," Tucker said. "It reminds me of being a kid and it's part of the reason I'm able to enjoy my existence here."

Tucker owns Evolution Music, Movies and Games in Edgewood Plaza and Grinder Music, a used record store at the former Southside Package and Lounge building at 1140 S. Florida Ave. He commutes via an "Xtracycle" between the two businesses.

The Xtracycle is a modified bicycle with a hitchless trailer that enables him to



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Peggy Strickland, 53, walks her bike through the showroom at the Lakeland Automall. Strickland rides her bike to work at the Automall in the morning and changes her clothes after she arrives.

comfortably haul up to 200 pounds, Tucker said. He also runs errands and goes to events on the bike.

"It's all pluses and very few downsides to riding a bike," Tucker said, adding that he recently logged 4,000 miles on his bike. "It's good for me, it's undeniably good for the environment, and I have a job where I don't work in a suit."

Gas prices had nothing to do with Tucker's decision to ride a bike more often, but they played a role in Peggy Strickland's decision to start biking to work daily.

"I wanted to not have a car," Strickland said.

Strickland thought her family could get by with just one vehicle - her husband's car - but the couple decided against taking that drastic step yet, she said.

"In the back of my mind, I think if I had to do without a car, I could," she said. "It's nice to know we could do with one vehicle if we had to."

Strickland, 52, commutes from her home in Dixieland to Lakeland AutoMall five days a week. She rides 12 miles round-trip, making the trip longer than necessary "just to get some riding time in."

"I find it very relaxing," she said, adding that she rides around Lake Hollingsworth, through downtown Lakeland and then to work.

She also rides her bike during her lunch hour, often to run errands such as going to the bank or the post office.

Strickland has commuted to work on her bike for about two years. Because she works at a car dealership, she wondered how people would feel about it, she said.

"Maybe it was a silly reservation, but (I felt like I was) kind of ditching my car for my bike," she said.

Her husband didn't want her to do it because he thought it was too dangerous, Strickland said, "But one day I just had to do it."

Riding her bike to work may save on gas money, but it requires additional time and some creative preparation for the workday, Strickland admitted.

Strickland wears a skirt and blouse at work every day, so she must arrive early enough to change clothes and put on makeup, she said. She uses baby wipes to clean up if she is sweaty and she keeps deodorant at work.

Now that the weather is warmer, Strickland will start riding her bike home at lunch after running errands, where she will take a shower and come back in her

car, or she will start bringing her lunch and eating it at the office if she has no errands to run, she said.

Bicycle commuting has been good for Strickland, physically and mentally.

"I'm in much better shape," she said. "I'm mentally in better shape, too."

If Strickland feels stressed out or tired from looking at her computer, she can ride at lunch and "feel so much better mentally" upon her return, she said.

## **A FAMILY AFFAIR**

Everyone commutes in the Smith household, whether it's to school or work. Everett Smith began biking the nearly four miles to work at Lockheed Martin in October. He and his daughter, Katie, 11, ride together and Katie peels off at Lakeland Highlands Middle School.

Wanda Smith rides with their son William, 7, to Highlands Grove Elementary, and she began commuting to her job at FITniche at Lakeside Village in early May.

The bike riding served as a way to expend some of William's energy before the school day started. He previously attended private school and was accused of having attention deficit/hyperactivity disorder.

After lots of money and testing, only to find that William was "all boy," Wanda Smith said she began walking, running and riding bikes to school with him to help burn some early-morning energy. Now he's a straight-A student who doesn't get in trouble.

A combination of factors helped push the family to bicycle commuting, Wanda Smith said.

"My husband and I are very defiant by nature," she said, laughing. "They can raise (gas) prices all they want, but we don't have to pay them."

In addition to saving money on gas, providing a way to stay in shape and "going green," bicycle commuting has been about self-achievement and self confidence, she said.

"It's about knowing you can when all the odds are against us," Wanda Smith said. "Parking often is unfriendly for commuters and at Lakeside, there is not one bike rack to be found."

There also is the constant issue with the dog that chases her, drivers who don't watch for cyclists and drivers who are distracted with mobile phones, she said. A true commuter has a lot to contend with on any given day.

## **CATCHING THE BUG**

It appears that more Polk County residents are considering bicycle commuting as an alternative to driving.

Kate Negri, a saleswoman at The Bike Shop of Winter Haven, has seen bike sales increase in recent months as fuel prices have steadily climbed.

"We've had a lot of people who say, 'I'm looking for a bike because I'm wanting to commute,'" Negri said.

Jim Andersen, owner of Andersen Cycle and Key Shop, Inc. in Winter Haven, has seen sales increase by about 25 percent in recent months.

Many more customers are inquiring about using bicycles to run errands.

"They're bringing bikes in to be repaired that have been in the garage forever," Andersen said. "I'm also selling a lot of baskets."

Every customer is talking about the increase in gas.

"I don't know if they are at the point of actually doing something, but they're certainly talking about it," Andersen said.

He has increased his orders by up to 15 percent for the next six months, in anticipation of more people purchasing bikes for commuting and running errands.

The staff at Bent's Cycling and Fitness also have fielded lots of inquiries about commuting and running errands via bicycle. In the past six months, more customers have indicated an interest in it, said LeRoy Manninen, store manager.

"The main question is, 'Can I take my existing bike and make it a more comfortable commuting bike?'" Manninen said.

They're also asking about racks, baskets and fenders, he said.

"We're starting to see the 1930s and '40s come back, when people wanted fenders on bikes so they wouldn't get mud on themselves."

Bicycle manufacturers appear to have heard the call, because more are offering commuter-friendly bikes.

"We have the commuter bikes on the floor and we're preparing for more people to start considering alternative transportation," Manninen said.

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