

Pedaling past the pump: High gas prices get commuters back in the saddle

By JOHN COX, Californian staff writer
Bakersfield Californian, Tuesday, June 17, 2008

When driving his eight-cylinder pickup 10 miles to work and back started costing him \$150 a month in gas, Jason May took a trip to the bicycle shop.

Fire Capt. Jason May has recently made the decision to ride his bike to work because of the continuous rise in gas prices. "I'm saving almost \$150 a week just from riding my bike to work," May said.

The Bakersfield city fire captain picked out a quality aluminum bike and accessories that set him back \$1,400 about six weeks ago. As steep as that sounds, May figures pedaling to and from the station has already saved him \$100.

"I couldn't be happier," he said. "I don't know why I haven't been doing this a lot longer."

As gasoline prices have skyrocketed in recent months, more commuters like him have begun riding to work to save money.

Local bicycle dealers report double-digit increases in sales of new bicycles and repairs of old ones, a trend that's helping counter a slowdown in purchases related to recreational cycling.

The health benefits of exercise help some people justify purchases of bicycles and commuter gear. But bike store workers say lately their customers' decisions almost always are based on simple economics: If gas prices stay as high as they are now, bicycling to work is bound to pay off down the road.

CHANGING HABITS

While no recent sales data are available industrywide, the head of the National Bicycle Dealers Association said he hears of two recent trends from retailers: The best-selling bikes these days are those geared toward commuters, and a lot of repair work is being done on bicycles that haven't been ridden in years. Both point to changing habits amid rising gas prices.

Gary Sundberg sees the evidence daily as bicycle department head at Sport Chalet on Stockdale Highway.

"What I'm seeing is a tremendous growth in people that are actually replacing the car with the bicycle for the short errands," Sundberg said, adding that he expects the store's bike sales to increase by up to 20 percent this year over last year.

At Snider's Cyclery on Union Avenue, front sales manager Tina Chapa estimated that revenues are up 40 percent over the same time last year, thanks largely to interest in commuter-friendly hybrid bikes, which combine the durability of a mountain bike with the efficiency of a road bike.

Repair work at the shop is twice what it was, she said, as people get older bikes back into commission.

"I would say at least in the last couple of weeks, 80 percent of the people (who) come in are saying, 'I need to start biking in to work. I cannot afford the gas,'" she said.

WORTHY INVESTMENTS

For a lot of customers, expenditures as large as \$1,000 are viewed as investments.

"I think they're looking at in, well, in the long run, this is going to pay for itself easily," said Sam Ames, a manager at Action Sports on Brimhall Road.

Bike Bakersfield is a local nonprofit on downtown Chester Avenue that promotes bicycle commuting. Staff there tell of a recent surge of calls and requests for commuter maps.

In May alone, events and membership coordinator Nikki Schissler said, the organization mapped out 40 new bicycle-friendly routes in response to customer requests.

A LONG HAUL

One woman asked for a route that would allow her to bicycle from Bakersfield to her job in Delano.

"It's a little impractical," she said. "It's 48 miles one way." Staff members ended up recommending that the woman take the bus.

For some people, pedaling in to the office works out to be more convenient than driving.

David Brust, the manager of Kern County's television station, started riding in about three times a week in February. It saves him about \$4.50 a day — enough to pay for his lunch, he said.

But aside from the savings, he said he enjoys spending time on the road while others wait around in traffic or rush from one light to the next. And whether he drives or bikes, it takes him half an hour to get to work.

"It's awesome, actually," he said.

Support for gas tax hike drops with higher fuel prices

By Denis Cuff

Contra Costa Times, Tuesday, June 17, 2008

Rising gas prices have soured support for the idea of imposing a 10-cents-per-gallon gasoline tax in the Bay Area to fight global warming by paying to expand public transit or reduce traffic congestion, according to a new poll by the region's transportation commission.

Only 37 percent of the 3,602 people polled in May said they would support or likely support the dime tax if it were placed before them on the ballot, according to the Metropolitan Transportation Commission, a nine-county agency.

Back in October before gasoline prices soared above \$4 a gallon, 69 percent of Bay Area residents polled said they would support a tax to pay for measures to fight global warming gases. A gas tax currently requires a two-thirds approval by voters, although a bill facing heated opposition in the California Legislature would reduce the passage threshold to a simple majority.

The new poll found that high gas prices are fueling the resistance to higher gas taxes. Some 44 percent of those polled picked "already too expensive" gas prices as their top concern about a gas tax. The average price for regular gasoline in the East Bay on Monday was \$4.56 a gallon, which includes an 18-cents-per-gallon state tax and an 18.4 cents-a-gallon federal tax.

"I think the poll shows we should not be looking at higher fees or taxes on gasoline right now," said Amy Worth, an Orinda city councilwoman and member of the Metropolitan Transportation Commission. "People are really feeling the pain of these huge spikes in gas prices."

Worth said action is needed to get more people to use public transit and to get out of motor vehicles, which account for about half of the carbon dioxide and other global warming gases generated in the Bay Area.

But she said political leaders' top priority should be fighting to preserve state public transit funding, which is in danger of being cut in the current state budget negotiations. Gov. Arnold Schwarzenegger earlier this year proposed cuts in basic state funding to public transit agencies, but Democratic legislators have resisted.

"We need to focus on hanging onto our state money for public transit while ridership is rapidly increasing," Worth said, "rather than spend energy on gas tax measures that have little chance of passing."

Discussions about raising gas taxes have picked up in California as transportation and pollution managers consider the difficult challenge in complying with a landmark 2006 state law that requires a 25 percent cut in greenhouse gas emissions by 2020.

While cleaner gas and engine requirements will help to meet the law, it will take other measures such as getting more people to ride trains, buses and ferries, and building housing near transit stations, transit commission staff members say.

A bill by state Sen. Tom Torlakson, D-Antioch, would make it easier to pass county or regional ballot measures to raise gas taxes or vehicle license registration fees to reduce greenhouse gases, but the proposal is meeting resistance in the Legislature.

AB 455 would lower the passage threshold from two-thirds approval to a simply majority approval with conditions. A county congestion management agency or a regional transportation agency would have to spell out how the money would be spent on anti-pollution or congestion measures. Those include public transit, road building and maintenance, pollution research, housing development near transit centers and low-energy measures in buildings.

Jerry Hill, a San Mateo County supervisor and chairman of the Bay Area Air Quality Management Board, said he supports Torlakson's bill because counties and regions should have a local fee ballot measure as "an option in their tool box" to fight global warming.

The California Truckers Association has opposed the bill.

Race track foes voice views

Proposed motor sports project report receives 51 negative comments

BY LUIS HERNANDEZ

Visalia Times-Delta and Tulare Advance-Register, Tuesday, June 17, 2008

Written comments received on the draft environmental impact report for the proposed Tulare Motor Sports Complex mirror those made during the first of two public hearings hosted by the Tulare Planning Commission.

Out of the 58 submissions, 51 were in opposition. One of the opposition letters called the proposed project "a monstrosity of a race track." There were only three letters of support for the project. Other submissions include a pamphlet about [air pollution](#), a Wall Street Journal article about the effects of race tracks in Kansas and North Carolina and a 52-page research paper about the economic impact on North Carolina.

Tulare Planning and Building Director Mark Kielty said those submissions are typical of draft EIRs.

The deadline to turn in written comments is Friday. All written comments received will be added to the ones made during the two public hearings, held May 19 and June 2, and all will be addressed on the final report.

City officials are also responding to state agencies interested in project, Kielty said.

Kielty expects the EIR to be posted on the Internet when it is finished, he said. Anyone who submitted a question will likely be contacted so they can read the report.

Kielty said he didn't know when the EIR will be completed, he said.

Fresno-based Michael Brandman Associates, which is preparing the report, will have to research all questions submitted, Kielty said.

As proposed by Fresno developer Bud Long, the complex will encompass 711 acres off South Laspina Street and will include a 50,000-seat race track, a 35,000-seat drag-racing strip, hotels and retail space.

The complex would create 16,359 new jobs and bring an estimated \$1 billion each year to the area, according to the report.

Additional public hearings to comment on the project are expected in late summer or early fall.

Toyota hybrid battery outpaced by demand

By YURI KAGEYAMA, AP Business Writer

Modesto Bee, Tuesday, June 17, 2008

TOKYO - Toyota is struggling to keep up with booming demand for its hybrid vehicles because it can't make enough of the batteries that are key parts in the hit "green" cars, a senior executive said Monday.

The crunch is likely to remain the rest of the year, as battery production can't be boosted until next year, said Toyota Motor Corp. Executive Vice President Takeshi Uchiyamada, who oversees production at Japan's top automaker.

"Hybrids are selling so well we are doing all we can to increase production," he told The Associated Press. "We need new lines."

Battery production is critical in determining how many hybrid vehicles Toyota can produce, Uchiyamada said at the company's Tokyo office.

Hybrids, including Toyota's top-selling Prius, offer better mileage than comparable gas-only cars by switching to an electric motor whenever possible.

Toyota leads the world's automakers in hybrids sold at about 1.5 million vehicles since the first mass-produced hybrid Prius came out about a decade ago. The company now offers other models in a hybrid version.

Prius and other hybrids are soaring in popularity around the world amid surging gasoline prices, and other automakers are also rushing to produce hybrids. Hybrids also boast a green image in reducing emissions linked to global warming.

But Uchiyamada, who is leading Toyota's effort to make auto production greener, acknowledged such efforts hadn't yet extended to battery production because of the problems keeping up with demand.

"That has to settle down first," said Uchiyamada, an engineer who helped develop the Prius.

Toyota said last week its hybrid-battery joint venture with Matsushita Electric Industrial Co., which makes Panasonic products, will begin producing next-generation lithium-ion batteries in 2009, and move into full-scale production in 2010.

Toyota also said it's setting up a battery research department later this month to develop an innovative battery that can outperform even that lithium-ion battery.

Toyota has also announced its third plant in Japan for producing current hybrid batteries, called nickel-metal hydride, that run the Prius and other hybrid models on sale now.

Lithium-ion batteries, now common in laptops, produce more power and are smaller than nickel-metal hydride batteries. Toyota has said lithium-ion batteries will be used in Toyota plug-in hybrids, which can be recharged from a home electrical outlet.

Other automakers are also revving up hybrid production.

Honda, Japan's second-biggest automaker, said it will boost hybrid sales to 500,000 a year after 2010. Honda said it will introduce a new hybrid-only model next year for a total lineup of four hybrids.

Nissan Motor Co., which still hasn't developed a hybrid for commercial sale, said that it will by 2010. Nissan says its joint venture with electronics maker NEC Corp. will start mass-producing lithium-ion batteries in 2009 in Japan.

Toyota plans to sell 1 million hybrid vehicles a year after 2010.

Honda rolls out its new zero-emission car

Associated Press

In the S.F. Chronicle, Tuesday, June 17, 2008

Honda's new zero-emission, hydrogen fuel-cell car rolled off a Japanese production line Monday and is headed to Southern California, where Hollywood is already abuzz over the latest splash in green motoring.

The FCX Clarity, which runs on hydrogen and electricity, emits only water and none of the noxious fumes believed to induce global warming. It is also two times more energy efficient than a gas-electric hybrid and three times that of a standard gasoline-powered car, the company says.

Honda expects to lease a few dozen cars this year and 200 within three years. In California, a three-year lease will run \$600 a month, which includes maintenance and collision coverage.

Among the first customers are actress Jamie Lee Curtis and filmmaker husband Christopher Guest, actress Laura Harris, film producer Ron Yerxa and businessmen Jon Spallino and Jim Salomon.

The FCX Clarity is an improvement of its previous-generation fuel cell vehicle, the FCX, introduced in 2005. A breakthrough in the design of the fuel cell stack, which powers the car's motor, allowed engineers to lighten the body, expand the interior and increase efficiency, Honda said.

Agencies offer year's only free rides Thursday

By Michael Cabanatuan

S.F. Chronicle, Tuesday, June 17, 2008

Bay Area residents will get their lone chance at a free ride on Thursday when air quality and transportation officials try to lure more drivers out of their cars and onto buses, trains and ferries.

In previous years, the Bay Area Air Quality Management District and the Metropolitan Transportation Commission offered free rides on transit on Spare the Air Days - days when ozone levels were expected to exceed federal standards.

But a lack of money, a changing focus in the fight for clean air, and a desire to persuade people to alter their commutes for more than a single day prompted the agencies to eliminate free rides on smoggy days and instead sponsor a single free ride day.]

"We're making a pivot in the (Spare the Air) program from Spare the Air Day to Spare the Air every day," said John Goodwin, spokesman for the Metropolitan Transportation Commission, the Bay Area's transportation planning and financing agency.

On Thursday, everyone will get a free lift until noon on BART, Caltrain, the Capitol Corridor, Altamont Commuter Express and the Golden Gate, Alameda-Oakland, Alameda-Harbor Bay and Vallejo Baylink ferries. All bus and light-rail systems will offer free rides all day.

The free rides are worth about \$1.8 million, Goodwin said. That's money left over from last summer when the Spare the Air free transit program planned for four days of free rides but used only two.

The agencies pay for the program with federal air quality improvement funds, but the money has stopped flowing until a new federal transportation spending plan is adopted, probably in late 2009. About \$4 million remains.

"We've got to stretch the remaining dollars as far as they'll go," said Goodwin, adding that plans for future years have not yet been determined.

Holding a single Spare the Air Day that's been scheduled in advance could also lure more drivers out of their cars by giving them time to plan ahead, said Kristine Roselius, a spokeswoman for the air district. Spare the Air Days were typically called about 18 hours before the free morning commute.

"It allows everyone to plan their route on transit, to change their schedule, to change their alarm clock," she said. "In the past, it's been difficult for some people to change their schedules on short notice."

But the hope is that some commuters will also change their lifestyles as a way of helping to reduce greenhouse gas emissions and not just cutting production of ozone on hot, smoggy days.

"We hope it will become a permanent habit," Roselius said.

Community Digest

West County Times

in the Tri-Valley Herald, Late Monday, June 16, 2008

FREE BUS RIDES THURSDAY: Riding WestCAT will be free all day Thursday as part of a planned Spare the Air Day, courtesy of the Bay Area Air Quality Management District and the Metropolitan Transportation Commission.

WestCAT is among about 30 Bay Area transit agencies that will offer free rides on all or part of Thursday. BART, trans-Bay ferries and commuter rail lines will offer free rides only until noon.

The goal of the free rides is to have commuters give WestCAT a try and stick with the transit agency on non-Spare the Air days, said WestCAT marketing coordinator Yvonne Morrow.

"We are trying to encourage more people to 'think outside the car' and to use alternative transportation every day, not just when a Spare the Air Day is called," she said.

WestCAT runs routes in West Contra Costa County north of Richmond's Hilltop area; express buses from Hercules to the El Cerrito Del Norte BART station and from Martinez to Del Norte via Highway 4 and Interstate 80; and Transbay "Lynx" express buses with free Wi-Fi connections to the Internet between Hercules-Rodeo and the San Francisco Transbay terminal.

Lisa Heyamoto: Doing the right thing backfires on commuter

By Lisa Heyamoto

Modesto Bee, Tuesday, June 17, 2008

All Joy Nishida was trying to do was the right thing.

Gas prices, air pollution, congestion -- it seemed important to do her part by taking public transit into work downtown every day, so she started driving her truck to the light-rail station, parking and riding.

Everything was going well until she returned to her vehicle one day to be met with an unmistakable noise when she started her engine.

Someone had walked into the unsecured parking lot, taken a saw to her catalytic converter and made off with a piece of her car.

Theft of the exhaust system has been on the rise since tweekers discovered that the precious metals from which they are made will fetch a fairly pretty penny, and late-model trucks like Nishida's are considered prime targets.

"I was thinking it was only a matter of time before they took mine," she said. "But I didn't expect it to happen so quick."

And then, it happened again.

Nishida's shiny new convertor had been on but one month when it was filched again -- and not even from the same light-rail station.

The result, Nishida hates to say, is one more car on the road. The cost and inconvenience of replacing the part was getting to be too much, and Nishida has received no assurances from RT that it won't happen again.

"It's a crime to stop me from doing the right thing," she said. "But I'm not going to take light rail again."

* * *

Speaking of parking, it's arguably one of the most American of our daily demands -- and one of our favorite things to denounce.

The two collided a few weeks ago, when a local blog pointed out that a downtown parking company had raised lot prices during a swearing-in ceremony for new U.S. citizens.

The usual price for a day's spot at the Priority Parking lot adjacent to Memorial Auditorium runs about \$8. But the company had raised the rate to \$25 for the special event.

To readers of the blog Sacramento Real Estate Statistics (the parking post, clearly, being a bit of a tangent) it seemed this was a poor way to welcome folks to the country, and they roundly criticized the move.

But, in what might be called a bluntness typical to our fellow countrymen (and women), Priority Parking owner Aaron Zeff said it's standard to raise the rates for any nearby event, and would not be shamed.

"Supply and demand is what built this economy and this country," he said. "If you want to walk two or three blocks, you can park for free."

Ah, but that would require something less than instant gratification, the edict for which is, I believe, the 28th amendment.

* * *

Speaking of parking lots, is your morning commute starting to resemble one as the I-5 project drags on?

Well, the city of Sacramento is suggesting you avoid the rush by, well, staying parked.

For the duration of the fix, the city is offering discounted \$5 parking at its downtown lots to encourage commuters to linger longer to wait out the worst of it.

"Every different opportunity we have to get people to stagger their commutes benefits the freeway systems," said city spokeswoman Linda Tucker.

Hard times may give state GOP opening

By Evan Halper - Los Angeles Times

in the Tri-Valley Herald, Late Monday, June 16, 2008

SACRAMENTO - California has a huge deficit, a looming cash crisis, an angry public and pressure to raise taxes - and in this dismal state of affairs, the state's minority Republicans see opportunity.

GOP lawmakers hope to use their leverage over the state budget, which cannot pass without some of their votes, to roll back landmark policies implemented by Democrats and the governor.

Among them are curbs on greenhouse gas emissions, regulations banning the dirtiest diesel engines and rules dictating when employers must provide lunch breaks for workers.

None of those laws has any direct connection to the state budget; changing them will do nothing to close California's \$17.2 billion deficit.

And the Democrats who control the Legislature have rejected Republican proposals to delay or eliminate the laws through the regular legislative process.

But as pressure mounts on lawmakers to resolve the budget crisis, the GOP's renewed requests could get some traction. Republican clout grows along with the state's financial problems - at least during the summer budget season.

"We think the budget is an appropriate place to talk about these issues," said Republican Sen. George Runner of Lancaster. "We are setting them on the table for discussion."

Runner acknowledges that the proposals won't help balance the state's books in the coming fiscal year, but he claims that they would stimulate the economy and thus generate cash for the state over time.

"They are reasonable issues to bring up" now, he said.

Lawmakers are making little progress in those negotiations. Legislators did not meet their June 15 constitutional deadline for passing a budget, and they are saying publicly that a spending plan is unlikely to be in place by the July 1 start of the fiscal year.

The state will run out of cash in September, according to the state treasurer, and finance officials say that borrowing to remain solvent will be extremely tough without a budget in place by July. Securing a loan takes time, and lenders look for an enacted budget as assurance that the state will have enough cash to repay them.

Democrats, meanwhile, are calling for as much as \$11.5 billion in new taxes - although they have not specified what they want to tax.

Republicans say cuts in government services and programs are the way to go - although they, too, mostly demur when it comes to specifics.

Republicans have made clear, however, that relaxing the environmental and labor laws would put them in more of a mood to compromise. That position has prompted sharp rebuke from Democrats and activists.

"Using a fiscal crisis to delay and roll back protections for Californians is just wrong," said Democratic Sen. Alan Lowenthal of Long Beach.

Sierra Club lobbyist Bill Magavern called the GOP lawmakers "a dwindling minority trying to exploit the limited leverage they have."

Environmentalists are particularly outraged by the Republican call for a delay in the curbs on greenhouse emissions. The global warming measure is one of Gov. Arnold Schwarzenegger's proudest accomplishments.

It has landed the governor, himself a Republican, on the covers of magazines around the world.

State officials are drafting rules for implementing the emissions caps, which are scheduled to take effect in January 2010. GOP legislators say complying with the rules will be costly for businesses at a time when they are reeling from the poor economy and higher oil prices.

They want the governor to exercise a provision in the law that allows him to postpone implementation by declaring that it would cause the state "significant economic harm."

Republicans are making the same case for new rules requiring retrofitting of diesel engines on trucks, tractors and heavy construction equipment.

The engines are a leading source of air pollution, and have been singled out by scientists as a cause of thousands of premature deaths and hospital admissions for respiratory problems in California each year.

Supporters of the laws say that that the sickness they will prevent and the boost they will give to "green" technologies promise to be far more helpful to California's economy than a potential delay in their implementation.

Schwarzenegger has said through aides that he does not wish to postpone the environmental regulations and won't let the budget situation sidetrack his long-term goals. But he also says nothing is off the table.

Schwarzenegger spokesman Aaron McLearn said the governor is interested, for example, in working with Republicans on a relaxation of workplace rules that dictate when employees must be granted lunch breaks.

The governor, an ally of the state Chamber of Commerce and other business groups, is sympathetic to complaints from business owners that some workplace rules cost them money without benefiting employees.

[Bakersfield Californian, Editorial, Tuesday, June 17, 2008:](#)

Will we sacrifice for 'quality'?

We're still not getting it. Kern County residents cite air pollution, traffic congestion and the loss of open space among their biggest concerns, but the vast majority of us still want single-family homes on big lots.

We fret about lengthening commute times but three-quarters of us still drive to work alone and won't consider carpooling, public transit or any other alternative means of transportation.

If the Kern Council of Governments' 2008 regional quality-of-life survey, conducted over 12 days in March and April, tells us anything, it's that county residents either have no idea how to achieve the communities they aspire to create, or they'd prefer that others make the required sacrifices while they continue on their merry way.

And that does not bode well for a cleaner, less-congested county.

The Kern COG survey, a 1,200-person random telephone poll that follows up on a similar study conducted in 2007, shows that Kern residents are still largely happy with their communities, if slightly more pessimistic.

And then there's that disconnect between what we want and what we're willing to do to achieve it.

People were most concerned about crime rates; air quality; issues related to growth and planning; a lack of unique attractions; and traffic congestion. They enjoy what they call the small-town nature of their

towns and cities. And they hope to see their communities attract more high-paying jobs and maintain basic local services such as public safety and education. Improving the county's air and water quality also ranks high.

But 84 percent of residents say they'd favor a single-family home with a large yard over other options such as a single family home with a small yard (65 percent), a townhouse or condominium (40 percent), an apartment (29 percent) or housing in a mixed-use development (21 percent).

Meanwhile, 48 percent of respondents rate the preservation of open space and animal habitats as "extremely important." And 65 percent of those living in the valley portion of the county rate traffic flow negatively compared to only one-third of those in the other parts of the county.

Guess what? Those things are directly connected to each other.

The bottom line is that the lifestyle changes necessary to improve air quality, ease traffic flow and preserve the rural nature of the county (including farmland) haven't been portrayed to the public clearly enough.

Public transit becomes more convenient if ridership improves because improved revenues will eventually lead to more stops and more frequency of stops. Housing in mixed-use developments can be pleasant and enticing if market demand prompts developers to build with flair and imagination. And high-density homes save open space, make public transit more convenient and spare the air.

But the chicken-or-egg equation keeps Kern County in the dark ages when it comes to realizing its own citizens' admirable aspirations. Here's an idea: Try making one small sacrifice for a better community -- find a carpool buddy, for example -- and see if it hurts.

[N.Y. Times, Editorial, Tuesday, June 17, 2008:](#)

R.I.P. to the S.U.V.

It's hard to convince most Americans that there is a silver lining to \$4-a-gallon gasoline. But General Motors provided a nugget of good news when it announced that it would shutter much of its production of pickups and sport utility vehicles - and might even get rid of the Hummer, the relative of the Abrams tank unleashed on the streets in the cheap-gas days of the 1990s.

It's hardly the solution to global warming, or the country's dependence on imported oil, but it's a start.

Playing the urban warrior in a Hummer was a fairly inexpensive thrill when a gallon of gas cost just over \$1. But at \$4 a gallon, driving a full-powered Hummer H3 or a big Ford F-150 would cost a typical driver, who drives 15,000 miles a year, almost \$4,300 in gas. This is more than 10 percent of the median earnings of full-time workers and about \$2,200 more than it would cost to drive the same distance in a Honda Civic.

By May, there were signs that the S.U.V.-era was over. For the first time, Detroit's Big Three automakers and their trucks were outsold in the United States by fuel-efficient cars made by Asian companies. And monthly sales of Ford's muscular F-series pickups fell by a third, bumping it five spots from its previous perch as America's best-selling vehicle, behind the Honda Civic, the Toyota Corolla, the Toyota Camry and the

Honda Accord. It was the first time since December 1992 that a car, not a truck, claimed the top spot in monthly sales.

The F-series pickup has been the nation's best-selling vehicle, on an annual basis, since 1981. But last month, the Ford Motor Company said that it would slash production of pickups and S.U.V.'s. Its full-size pickup plant in Cuautitlán, Mexico, is expected to be used to produce the Ford Fiesta, a subcompact car, instead.

Expensive gasoline is not good news for most American families. In some rural areas where people must drive long distances, and a pickup is more of a necessity than a lifestyle choice, filling up the tank can eat up nearly 15 percent of a worker's take-home income. Pricey gasoline is acting as a brake on the economy and pushing up the price of food and other goods.

Still, Americans' response to rising gasoline prices makes an excellent case for a gas tax. It proves that drivers will change their behavior in response to high fuel prices. And even if Detroit doesn't buy global warming, drivers can help persuade it to embrace fuel efficiency. They don't even have to know that the Honda Civic emits less than half the 13 tons of greenhouse gases spewed by the Ford F-150.