

Survey reveals Texans' transportation concerns

By Brandi Grissom / Austin Bureau

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AUSTIN - If you've been eyeing a Prius, thinking about sticking close to home this summer and maybe even talking about a neighborhood carpool, you're far from alone in Texas.

As gas prices in El Paso continued inching toward \$4 a gallon Wednesday, a newly released statewide poll showed more than half of Texans are rethinking their summer vacation plans. The wide-ranging poll conducted this month by the Texas Lyceum, a nonprofit, nonpartisan leadership group, also asked Texans their thoughts on paying for transportation and on the ever-controversial topic of cell-phone use in cars.

"The pinch of rising gas prices, increased

congestion, and the costs of transportation projects are changing how people feel about transportation in Texas," said Daron Shaw, a University of Texas at Austin government professor and Lyceum pollster.

Suzanne Lozano, who lives in the Upper Valley, said her family cut their recent two-week vacation to California a day short to save money. Fill-ups for their Suburban totaled about \$600.

In town, Lozano said, she tries to run all her errands in one trip and drives the family's smaller car whenever she can. "The kids don't like it, but we cram (into) the Volkswagen," Lozano said.

And, Lozano said, she's talking about starting a carpool with other families to take their children to and from school this fall.

According to the Lyceum Poll, which surveyed 1,000 Texans and had a 3-percentage-point margin of error, more than two-thirds of Texans would strongly consider buying a hybrid car, such as a Prius, or a more fuel-efficient vehicle because of gas prices.

Almost two-thirds said they would strongly consider carpooling, and more than half would strongly consider using public transportation to commute to work and school.

Eastsider Bill Lewis, an 86-year-old World War II veteran, bought a tiny Smart car in April. He said he's filled the Mercedes-Benz-made car's eight-gallon gas tank twice in two months. One tank, Lewis said, will last about 350 miles.

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Plus, he gets plenty of approving looks in his zippy little silver-and-black car.

"Everyone that sees it is thrilled with it," Lewis said, "women and men both."

The poll may also provide some insight on the political bind facing lawmakers looking for ways to pay for new roads in Texas.

While a majority said they wanted more spending to reduce traffic congestion, few were willing to pay for those projects with tolls or with increased gas taxes.

"It captures the difficulties (lawmakers) have been having," said Jim Henson, director of the Texas Politics Project at UT Austin, who helped with the poll.

Lawmakers and transportation officials have said the state lacks funds to keep up with growing highway needs in Texas. But proposals to increase gas taxes or build toll roads to address those needs have caused public outcry.

When it comes to cell phones in cars, 60 percent of those polled said they would support a ban on talking and driving. At the same time, though, more than a third admitted to using their phones while behind the wheel.

Rosario Rivera, who lives in Central El Paso, said she would definitely support a ban on cell phone use while driving.

"Even if we want to be very careful, it is trouble-

making," she said.

Lozano, of the Upper Valley, laughed as she admitted to using the phone in her car. She said she knows it's a distraction, and she would support a ban, especially now that her daughter is approaching driving age.

"We just need to get away from it," Lozano said. "It's more of a ball-and-chain than I realize."

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Poll findings

Texas Lyceum Poll results:

51 percent are strongly considering not taking a summer vacation.

66 percent would strongly consider buying a hybrid car or fuel-efficient

vehicle.

63 percent would strongly consider carpooling.

53 percent would strongly consider using public transportation to get to work or school.

49 percent said traffic congestion is a "very important" issue facing Texas; 35 percent said it was "somewhat important."

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66 percent oppose tolls on new roads.

69 percent oppose tolls on existing roads.

60 percent strongly oppose increasing the gas tax; 12 percent somewhat oppose it.

44 percent said they use a cell phone while driving.

60 percent strongly or somewhat support a ban on cell-phone use while driving.

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