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Many Texans may keep summer road trip closer to home, poll finds

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AUSTIN — Texans appear willing to temper their love for the automobile to offset the ever-rising price of gasoline, and many are seriously considering scrapping plans to hit the road for a summer vacation, a new poll by a statewide think tank shows.

In a random telephone survey of 1,000 adults conducted for the Texas Lyceum, a nonprofit leadership organization, 51 percent of the respondents said they might just spend their vacation time closer to home.

"As we know, most Texans highly value the freedom of driving and owning their own car, but our survey shows the pinch of rising gas prices [and] increased congestion . . . are changing how people feel about transportation in Texas," said Daron Shaw, a pollster at the University of Texas at Austin who conducted the survey, released Wednesday.

Just over half of the respondents said they would consider taking public transportation to and from work, and 63 percent would explore the possibility of joining a car pool. Two-thirds said they would strongly consider switching to a more fuel-efficient automobile or buying a hybrid.

Meanwhile, a poll by the Texas chapter of the AAA found that most of its members still plan to take a summer car trip but that they might shorten the distance to save on gas.

The apparent frustration with gas prices extended to other aspects of transportation, according to the Lyceum poll.

Seven in 10 respondents said state leaders should invest more money in improving existing roads, and about the same ratio said more resources should be devoted to mass transportation. Six in 10 said more money is needed to build roads and highways.

But when it came to finding the funds to bring those projects to fruition, respondents shifted gears. More than 7 in 10 opposed raising the state's gasoline tax, which is 20 cents a gallon. And nearly that many opposed building toll roads or charging tolls on roads already in use.

Shaw said that the poll, conducted June 12-20, was weighted to ensure that the sample reflected the demographic makeup of Texas. The margin of error was plus or minus 3 percentage points.

In the AAA survey of 350 randomly selected members conducted by e-mail, 53 percent of respondents said they intended to take summer vacations despite the prospect of paying upward of \$4 per gallon for gas.

Fifteen percent of respondents planned to take more summer trips than last year, and 31 percent expected to take fewer.

"Our members are concerned about the impact of high gas prices on their budgets," said Mark Bell, vice president and general manager of AAA Texas. "But most are not giving up on summer vacations. People are finding ways to continue traveling."

About three-quarters of surveyed members said they expected to spend about the same amount or more on travel compared with last summer, while 28 percent said they expected to spend less. When asked why they expected to spend less, 71 percent cited record gas prices as their primary reason.

Nearly 90 percent of AAA Texas members surveyed from May 13 to June 2 said they planned to take at least one leisure trip this summer, while 12 percent were not planning any trips.

A spokesman for the automobile association acknowledged that the organization's 1 million-plus members in Texas might be more committed to driving than the state's population at large. But he said they might not be going as far as in years past.

"They might be staying a little closer to home," Dan Ronan said. "There are an awful lot of things to do and places to go in Texas."

Both surveys came as a government watchdog group released a study showing that the economic stimulus package backed by President Bush and approved by Congress to kick start the economy is likely being used by most families to cover rising gas costs.

The study by the Texas arm of the Public Interest Research group found that families that received the \$1,500 government rebate probably had spent that much for gasoline since the package was approved in February in the hope that families would use it to make major purchases.

"In other words, families across the country have spent more than the amount of their stimulus check on gas since the program became law — long before all of the checks have been put in the mail and only 19 weeks since President Bush signed the stimulus plan into law," the group's report said.

A driving issue Some of the findings in the Texas Lyceum poll:

Gas tax increase

26 percent of respondents support increasing the tax to pay for transportation projects; 72 percent oppose it.

Cellphones

60 percent support banning cellphone use while driving; 37 percent oppose it.

44 percent said they talk on their cellphone while driving.