

Casual carpooling and the environment

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Earlier this month, the Alameda Journal published a story that started with "Carpooling may be good for the environment ..." and went on to describe the troubles (parking tickets) some casual carpool drivers experience while parking in bus stops to wait for riders.

This prompted me to wonder, "Who uses casual carpools?" There have been a few studies that answer this question, including one from the East Bay. Turns out the answer is complicated. (Isn't it always?) First, it's important to separate "carpooling," people with similar commutes sharing a car to make their trip, from "casual carpooling," picking up passengers at transit stops to take to downtown SF.

A 1999 East Bay study found that 87 percent of casual carpool passengers would use transit if they weren't casual carpooling. More surprising, the study found that more than 30 percent of casual carpool drivers would use transit.

The study actually finds that casual carpooling increases the number of cars on the road. Which isn't to say that casual carpooling is necessarily bad, just that "good for the environment" might not be its big selling point.

Casual carpooling offers benefits to transit riders in that it's free, often quicker (because you don't have to wait for the bus to come) and helps riders avoid crowded Transbay buses in which they might have to stand. For drivers whose commute is not transit-friendly, it offers no toll over the bridge and use of the HOV lane.

And for AC Transit, casual carpooling allows the agency to purchase fewer buses: It can run fewer Transbay buses in the morning, which are then used to provide school service, such as the 631 from Bay Farm Island to Alameda's middle and high schools. In the afternoon, the school routes finish right as the afternoon commutes pick up, so the buses finish dropping off students and head to SF to pick up workers heading home, including people who casual carpooled to the office.

So there are benefits to casual carpooling, although "helping the environment" does not appear to be one of them. That's not to say that carpooling (or vanpooling) isn't good for the environment. MTC has a great rideshare program (the overall term for carpool/vanpool). Anyone can visit rideshare.511.org and sign up for ridesharing, and you will be connected with others who share similar commutes and are interested in sharing cars.

This kind of carpooling, in which three or four current drivers combine their commutes, actually achieves "good for the environment" status, as it reduces emissions by removing vehicles from crowded roads, all while allowing ridesharers the benefits of HOV lane use and no tolls.

All of this points to a long-running issue for me: the priority we as a community put on various projects. It seems that the casual carpool issues mentioned in the newspaper should be addressed if there's an easy and cheap solution. However, in the specific instance mentioned in the article, the Encinal and Park Avenue neighborhood already has parking issues. A recent Public Works study found that Regent Street was 91 percent parked in the middle of the day. Not exactly a location screaming for adding more "no parking" than already exists.

Casual carpooling is a positive thing for transit users, but the city needs to decide whether it's a priority above other projects, such as bringing Car Share to downtown or installing other transit projects, such as the remaining 18 bus shelters in the city bus shelter program finalized almost five years ago. Not to mention, in these tight budget times, just staying on top of the work that needs to be completed to finalize the Transportation Master Plan and its various parts, or other Public Works projects.

It's easy to start chasing the issue of the day. One hopes that in looking at issues like this, someone in the city is asking: "Where does this fit in relation to our other priorities?" And I'd be remiss in talking about transit and not making a pitch to vote yes on Measure VV.

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