

The Columbus Dispatch

Mad money going to fill up gas tank

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BY DAN GEARINO

THE COLUMBUS DISPATCH

Think twice about going to a restaurant or a movie, or even a coffee shop.

The money for those things is vanishing into the fuel tank, according to central Ohio drivers who are learning to deal with \$3.50-per-gallon gasoline.

"There is no more pocket money for weekend adventures," said Steven Perkins 36, of Reynoldsburg.

He filled the tank of his Dodge Durango, grateful that the price was \$3.34 per gallon, a relative bargain compared with the \$3.49 charged at most of the nearby stations.

"It's crazy," he said. "Just crazy."

One of the lowest prices in town was at the Speedway on Cemetery Road in Hilliard, where drivers lined up for gas that was priced at \$3.25 over the lunch hour.

Some of the customers who searched for the best deal on www.gasbuddy.com found that prices were changing so quickly that the only guarantee of a price was when you drove up to the station and began to pump the gas.

Prices began to soar early last week, rising nearly 20 percent as unrest in Libya led to fears about a tight supply of crude oil. Drivers had little choice but to absorb the cost and try to spend less on other things.

"It makes people make the hard choice about how to spend money," said Matt Romans, 23, of Grove City.

Already, he is spending less on movies and restaurants. Some drivers are taking even more-drastic steps.

"I'm going back to the COTA bus," said Dee Dunbar, 49, of the West



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Side.

Her \$20 bought only a few gallons of gas at a station near where she lives.

"I can't do this," she said.

COTA has experienced a surge in demand over the past two months, said spokesman Marty Stutz. In January, the last month for which statistics are available, ridership was up 8 percent compared with the prior year. He expects that the increase was even greater in February.

"I'm a regular bus rider every day, and I see more people on my bus," he said. "We know people are gravitating toward transit as prices go up."

As more people cut expenses, the ramifications will ripple through the economy, said Ann Paulins, who leads the Department of Human and Consumer Sciences Education at Ohio University.

But she thinks prices will need to go higher before the economy sustains serious damage.

"People aren't scrambling to cancel their spring vacations or summer vacations right now," she said. "But I suspect if we see a price of \$4 come true, then people will pull back on travel plans."

And that's bad for a wide variety of businesses, including gas stations.

"It's really just an ugly thing out there right now," said Ron Milburn, vice president of the Associated Food and Petroleum Dealers, a trade group with offices in Dublin for independently owned gas stations.

"People are going to be driving less. There's no doubt about that," he said.

Gary Robson, owner of three central Ohio Marathon stations, was paying about \$3.35 per gallon wholesale for regular unleaded, about 4 cents higher than a day earlier. He was charging \$3.49 per gallon at his station on Bridge Street in Dublin.

If he wanted to match the \$3.25 at the Speedway in Hilliard, about 6 miles away, he would lose \$5,000 to \$6,000 in a day or two, he said. His loss would come as a result not only of the price of gas but also all of the related costs for credit-card fees and the state's commercial-activities tax.

"It's financially debilitating," he said.

On that score, most customers would agree.

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