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Cars to get a day off next week

Clean Air Campaign urges metro Atlantans to try alternative means of commuting to work.

To get to her job in Buckhead, Smyrna resident Amy Puckett typically jumps into her car, an eight-mile trip that takes up to 40 minutes.

But several days next week, the 30-year-old graphic designer plans to ditch her car in favor of a different set of wheels: her mountain bike.

Officials with the state's Clean Air Campaign hope others follow Puckett's lead and take part in the organization's "Give Your Car a Day Off" week, starting on Monday.

Commuters who normally clog area roads and highways are being asked to voluntarily leave their cars at home for at least a day and instead take a bus or train, ride in a car pool or van pool, walk, bike or even work from home.

Kevin Green, executive director of the Clean Air Campaign, said he's confident some of those who make the switch will enjoy their new commute and make a habit out of it, helping to ease traffic and improve the region's air quality.

"A lot of us drive every day without thinking," Green said. "This promotion at least will make people think about other options. The best way to break a habit is to try something different."

Puckett's morning routine will change dramatically when she travels via bicycle. She'll need to leave her home much earlier than usual, and she'll have to change clothes and freshen up at the office, using baby wipes.

Puckett said she's motivated by a desire to live a more "green" lifestyle while also slashing her gas expenses.

"Anything I can do to save a few dollars out of my own pocket, and it also has a positive impact on the environment," she said.

The number of people taking MARTA or a suburban commuter bus has risen in recent years as people look for ways to avoid high gas prices or time wasted sitting in traffic. But changing people's habits may be difficult. Nearly 80 percent of metro Atlanta commuters drive alone to work, according to the Census Bureau — not surprising in a region where jobs and homes are so spread out. About 11 percent carpool, 4 percent work at home, and 3 percent take transit.

Green feels those numbers could improve, if people are open to new ideas.

"Many people think they can't possibly use a commute alternative — their schedules are

too hectic, they live too far from transit, they don't know anyone to car pool with," he said. "But almost anyone can find a way to give it a try for one day next week."

And there's an incentive to those who make a more permanent switch. The Clean Air Campaign's "Cash for Commuters" offers up to \$180 over a three-month period to people who take transit, car pool, walk or bike to work.

"Give Your Car a Day Off" is being co-sponsored by WSB-AM. TV station WSB is owned by Cox Enterprises Inc., which also owns The Atlanta Journal-Constitution.