

Finding value in the car pool hassle

Cheaper but less efficient way to N.Y.C.



CHRIS PEDOTA/STAFF PHOTOGRAPHER

From left, Kevin Zavian, Robin Zavian, Berj Zavian and John Cichowski with Berj's 1998 Buick. Car poolers can no longer use the HOV lane through the Lincoln Tunnel and must wait in limited cash lanes to receive a discount.

I was crammed in the right rear seat of the 1998 Buick and the gal in the middle had to stretch one of her sneakered feet on top of the front-seat console, but the trip into Manhattan was pleasant enough and fast enough until, of course, we reached the jam at the mouth of the Lincoln Tunnel.



JOHN CICHOWSKI

THE ROAD WARRIOR

That's where Keith Zavian, the driver of the self-proclaimed Oldest and Cheapest Semi-Regular New York-New Jersey Family Car Pool, had to find a combination cash-and-E-ZPass lane and make sure he caught the attention of the toll taker. If he failed either mission, he would surely draw the wrath of Berj, the family's 80-year-old patriarch in the front seat, and his sister, Robin, in the back, who would likely take her sneakered foot and — well, let's not think about that.

Luckily, Keith's skill as the See **ROAD** Page L-6

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KILLING

CLIFF LAKE — Embattled woman Joanne Howatt attended a council meeting since she was charged by authorities early last month with theft by deception and witness tampering.

Despite her absence from the dais, local officials' continued legal prodding to be a distraction. "Very unfortunate," Mayra Paglia said of the legal

67, was charged with deception in July for attempting to obtain residences for her visiting children and failing to fully disclose the summer day camp in the priorities said. The money was later repaid, but only because the money had been served pertaining to the incidents said.

See **COUNCIL** Page L-6

Road

From Page L-1

family wheel man prevailed, because the toll collector nodded in his direction, and all five of us could breathe easily again.

"I usually say 'Hi,' which usually gets their attention," Keith said, "but sometimes we get this gal who refuses to acknowledge us in any way, so we never know what we're being charged until we get our bill."

So goes the daily peril of the Port Authority's E-ZPass Car Pool discount – the least efficient but best commuting discount of the 21st century in North Jersey. Most of us now pay \$8 to cross the Hudson, but the E-ZPass car-pool discount lets subscribers like the Zavians get through the crossings for a measly \$2 – a big, 75 percent bargain, provided the driver can thread his way through traffic to a cash lane and get the attendant's attention so he or she punches in the discount.

"If not, I call the Port Authority and give 'em hell," said Berj, owner of the Buick and the keeper of all the E-ZPass receipts.

If you've dealt with the Port Authority or E-ZPass, you know that neither is a pushover. But neither is Berj, a child of the Great Depression and an avid recycler who knows a bargain when he sees one. He has the uncanny ability to minimize the cost of anything, including car travel – a big drain on any budget.

A jeweler and estate appraiser,

he bought the Buick four years ago for \$3,000 solely for commuting from his River Edge home to the family business – Cluster Jewelry – on West 48th Street. He spends \$1,000 yearly on maintaining the car and \$3,840 for parking about six blocks from the office. But the family car pool (which often includes a childhood friend and various acquaintances) provides the best bargain. Instead of \$2,000 a year for tolls, the discount lowers the bill to a measly \$500 – just about what he paid in the 1970s, and only double the cost in the 1940s and '50s when he drove his father, the founder of Cluster Jewelry, to work each day.

"That makes it the oldest and cheapest family car pool to New York," he boasted.

"My father is the original penny-pincher," laughed Robin as they walked near Times Square and Berj stopped to pick up a free newspaper.

Wouldn't it be just as cheap to take a bus?

"Nope," he said. "It's about \$4 each way for each of us."

Bus fare would hit about \$200 monthly when you include Keith, who drives in from Maywood each day, Robin, who gets picked up in Hasbrouck Heights, and Denise Magyer and one of two others who alternate for the fifth seat from Cliffside Park. Berj doesn't charge any of them, and like a good secretary, he keeps a calendar in the glove compartment to keep track of days off and substitute riders. So technically, his bargain isn't what it used to be. On the other hand, all but two

of the car poolers work for Cluster, which is now run by Keith, so Berj figures he has the system beat – except ...

"It used to be better," he said. "It's getting worse," echoed Keith. "We used to zip through the tunnel on the HOV lane. It's 30 minutes longer now."

Until last April, HOV lanes accepted all high-occupancy vehicles. Now it's restricted to buses. PA police ticket sedan, SUV and van drivers, even if they're carrying seven passengers. That left three, crowded cash-and-E-ZPass-only lanes for car poolers. Lately, only two of these lanes accept them.

"It doesn't make sense," said Denise, a banker. "You'd think they'd encourage car pools because they take cars off the road, and by moving us through quickly, we reduce pollution."

PA representatives insist that the change moves traffic more quickly by freeing up the HOV for buses, but nobody's buying that. The Port saves money each time it cuts back on cash-only lanes because that reduces the need for toll collectors.

Even without the HOV incentive, car pooling is a good deal. It's astounding that fewer than 200 E-ZPass customers have signed up for this discount. New Jersey penny-pinchers should call 888-288-6865 or visit panynj.gov/bridges-tunnels/e-zpass.html for details.

Road Warrior runs Wednesday, Friday and Sunday. E-mail cichowski@northjersey.com. Blog: northjersey.com/blogs/roadwarrior.

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Teachers: Jobs hard to find

From Page L-1

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