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DRIVERS GO PUBLIC: TOLL & GAS HIKES SPUR TRANSIT SURGE

By LOIS WEISS

May 4, 2008 -- Who needs congestion pricing?

Bridge-and-tunnel commuters, fuming over the rising costs of gas and tolls, are hanging up their car keys in record numbers.

The radical off-road shift has the number of straphangers surging by 9 percent - 10.9 million more riders jammed the subway in February than in the same month last year.

"Gas prices have been trending upwards since the year 2000, and when you get into the number you are seeing these days, it has a significant effect on people's wallets, and they start making major changes," AAA spokesman Robert Sinclair Jr. said.

Meanwhile, the Metro-North Railroad saw ridership shoot up 15 percent in February from the same month last year.

Metro-North added 67 trains throughout its suburban train system just last month - and it may not be enough.

"At the peak of the peak there is simply no more room," said Marjorie Anders, a Metro-North spokeswoman.

"No one expected the gas price to stay this high for this long."

Also in February, Long Island Rail Road ridership rose by 700,000 from last year, to 6.7 million.

And last October, there were a record 23 million New Jersey Transit rail riders. Over the first three months of this year, rail ridership increased 5.3 percent, according to NJ Transit estimates.

"[We] are hearing that there is some correlation between first-time riders and the higher price of gas," spokeswoman Courtney Carroll said.

After the toll hikes went into effect March 1 on the six Port Authority crossings between New York and New Jersey, 4.8 percent fewer drivers, about 15,000 per day, used them, compared with March 2007.

The MTA's bridges and tunnels saw a 2.9 percent decrease in cars passing through in March.