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*Abridgment*

# Texas Vanpool Program

**DONALD A. MAXWELL AND JAMES P. McINTYRE**

**The U.S. Department of Energy's annual report on state energy conservation programs for 1979 cites the Texas vanpool program as one of the most innovative programs in the nation. This report ranked Texas first nationwide in the number of official programs in existence (54) and first in the number of vans on the road (910). Between January 1978 and January 1981, the number of vans on the road increased by more than 900 percent. Vanpooling continues to grow in Texas, but not at the furious pace of 1000/year set during the last half of 1979. According to the January 1981 edition of the Texas vanpool census, there are 2008 vans on the road (with 34 more on order) at 122 sites as part of 103 individual programs. These 2008 vans carry 22 100 passengers, eliminate 16 000 cars from the road, and save 8.12 million gal of fuel each year. These vans represent an investment of $20 million in private capital. This paper attempts to explain how and why the Texas vanpool program grew from 14 vans in 1974 to the present totals.**

The Texas vanpool program is best defined as a cooperative effort involving the Texas Energy and Natural Resources Advisory Council (TENRAC) and the Texas Transportation Institute (TTI), about 100 vanpool program coordinators (almost all in the private sector), and various other state agencies. The roles of TENRAC and TTI have been to provide a focal point for technical assistance and information exchange and to persuade other organizations to initiate programs. The Texas Railroad Commission, Department of Public Safety, Department of Highways and Public Transportation, and State Board of Insurance all support the program.

The key to the success of the program, however, has been the willingness of farsighted employers to accept that they have a stake in how their employees get to work. These employers established programs at their own facilities, and many of the early vanpoolers have played a significant role in promoting the vanpool concept. Under the leadership of the Houston National Association of Vanpool Operators (NAVPO), Houston is now the "vanpool capital of the world" and has 1511 vans at 60 sites.

The basic strategy of the program has been to create a vanpooling community that embraces all active participants without creating a vanpooling bureaucracy to get in the way. The idea is to enlist as many salespersons as possible to market vanpooling at every opportunity--not to set up a tsar of vanpooling to market a specific house brand.

The remainder of this paper describes how the Texas vanpool community emerged and gained the position of prominence it now enjoys. Included is a short review of the history of Texas vanpooling (1974-1977), the recent period of rapid growth (1978-1980), and a description of how we attempt to coordinate a statewide effort.

## BEGINNINGS: 1974-1977

Contrary to some published reports, the first Texas vanpool program was implemented in Dallas, not Houston. Texas Instruments initiated their first program with 9 vans in March 1974 at their main facility. By the end of 1977, this program had grown to 14 vans. The next program in Dallas was a one-van pilot program initiated by Crum and Forester Insurance Company in 1977.

Although Dallas had Texas' first program, the focus of vanpooling quickly moved from Dallas to Houston. The primary reason for this shift was the missionary zeal with which CONOCO promoted the concept in Houston. CONOCO put 10 vans on the road in 1975 and has steadily added to that number. Following CONOCO's example, other companies in Houston began their own programs. Soon, 10 programs that had 160 vans were operating in the city. In addition to CONOCO, this early group consisted of ARAMCO, ARMCO, Brown and Root, Comet-Rice, Gulf Oil, Hughes Tool, Mitchell Energy, Mobil Oil, and Prudential Insurance. [Brown and Root, one of the early programs expanded to 265 vans by 1980, the largest program in the state (1).] This early group of dedicated vanpoolers formed the first local chapter of NAVPO in 1979.

Two other significant programs began during this period. United Services Automobile Association (USAA) in San Antonio initiated a pilot program late in 1978 with 6 vans. In spite of a four-day workweek and the use of 15-passenger vans, this program grew rapidly to become one of the largest in the state. The Mason and Hanger, Silas Mason Company, Inc., program at the PANTEX plant outside of Amarillo started in 1977 with 30 vans. This is the largest and most successful owner-operator program in the state and remains the only significant program at a federal agency. In addition to the vans that operate in Houston, CONOCO and Gulf began operating six vans to and from remote sites.

During this early period, numerous promotional efforts were sponsored by various government agencies. A national conference on areawide carpooling was held in Houston in 1975. The Federal Energy Administration (FEA) conducted a series of vanpool workshops in Houston, San Antonio, Dallas, Fort Worth, Beaumont, Corpus Christi, and Lubbock in 1977. The U.S. Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) sponsored three workshops in Houston, Dallas, and San Antonio early in 1978. It is difficult to assess the effect of this effort, but at least two of the major programs (USAA and PANTAX) began as a result of the FEA workshop series.

During this period, no attempt was made to alter the regulatory climate of the state to make it more favorable for the growth of vanpooling. Although the current situation was far from ideal, employers found that, as long as their programs were not open to the public-at-large and as long as they operated on a share-the-expense basis, they could operate within the existing regulations. In exploring the possibility of creating legislation more favorable to vanpools, we were advised more than once to "leave well enough alone." In retrospect, we are still convinced it was good advice.

By the end of this early period the commitment to vanpooling varied considerably in different parts of the state. The greatest public awareness was in Houston, where the early vanpoolers actively promoted the concept. Otherwise, most of the interest in vanpooling at this time was along the Interstate 35 corridor between San Antonio and Dallas.

In summary, by the end of 1977 the vanpooling concept was well established. A total of 15 vanpool-related workshops had been held. Fourteen programs were under way, and 196 vans were on the road. The Houston vanpool group actively promoted the concept to all who would listen. In short, significant progress had been made toward establishing a base from which to build a strong statewide effort.

## RAPID GROWTH: 1978-1980

Late in 1977 the Governor's Office of Energy Resources (which became a part of TENRAC in 1979) received a grant from the U.S. Department of Energy (DOE) to promote vanpooling as one of the mandatory programs in the state energy conservation plan (SECP). The Governor's Office of Energy Resources entered into an interagency agreement for technical assistance with TTI in January 1978, and the Texas vanpool program got under way. To date, the combined effort has cost less than \$250 000.

The ridesharing goal in the SECP was set at 1500 vans on the road by the end of 1980, with an increase of 0.2 percent in carpooling (2). In addition, vanpooling is one of three specific actions cited by the governor to meet interim voluntary gasoline conservation targets released quarterly by DOE. Although TENRAC is not a part of the state's traditional transportation establishment, the governor looks to TENRAC to provide the focal point for vanpooling because of its importance in meeting energy conservation goals.

The original SECP called for a rather specific promotional process to be carried out by TENRAC. The steps, which were to be carried out in chronological order, were as follows:

1. Conduct 24 (series 1) workshops and meetings with the 24 metropolitan planning organizations (MPOs) in the state and establish a local plan to promote ridesharing,
2. Cohost with the MPOs 24 (series 2) workshops for the major employers in each urban area to persuade them to initiate vanpool programs, and
3. Conduct at least 24 (series 3) followup meetings with employers who attended the workshops and expressed an interest in gaining more information.

The first eight months of 1978 were spent in developing materials, attempting to set up series 1 workshops, and in meeting with local ridesharing agencies and existing vanpool program coordinators. The reaction of vanpool coordinators was favorable but guarded. The reaction of ridesharing agencies and the State Department of Highways and Public Transportation ranged from mild interest to outright hostility. The San Antonio Energy Conservation Office was the only experienced ridesharing agency that actually cohosted a workshop. With few exceptions, the MPOs were generally convinced that employers in their area would not be interested in vanpooling and that a workshop would be a waste of time.

These early experiences suggested that we had misread the situation. It became clear that the process as outlined in the SECP was unworkable for several reasons:

1. Local ridesharing agencies seemed afraid that we might upset the local operation and impose statewide policies,
2. Ridesharing was not very high on the priority list of the transportation establishment,
3. A number of MPOs had experienced disappointing results in their 1973 venture into ridesharing and were not eager to try again, and
4. The level of awareness of vanpooling in the state varied widely from one area to another; therefore, different strategies had to be developed for different areas.

We began to realize that working through customary channels was not the best procedure when we learned that the employers whom we contacted on our own initiative were more receptive than the transportation agencies that were supposed to be leading the local effort. Based on experience, we decided to veer away from the original SECP. With approval from the regional DOE office, we laid out a new strategy that called for the following steps:

1. Visit chambers of commerce to obtain lists of employers that might be receptive to vanpooling;
2. Use the lists provided by chambers of commerce to telephone interested employers to set up on-site visits (series 3) to sell vanpooling; the approach would emphasize financial incentives for employers instead of energy conservation (3); and
3. Hold large meetings (series 2) on request.

A new slide show and hand-out materials emphasizing financial rewards were developed for this new approach. After establishing an informal goal of 60 employer visits, we got under way with the new strategy in November 1978. With the help of the Austin and Dallas Chambers of Commerce, the San Antonio Energy Office, and the State Department of Highways and Public Transportation, a total of 80 workshops and meetings had been held by the fall of 1979.

During the summer 1979, a period of fuel shortages for many Texans, interest in vanpooling accelerated greatly. Vanpooling was seen by some as a way of avoiding the long gasoline lines or a way of being assured of a ride to work in times of very tight supplies. TENRAC assisted companies that had their own fuel storage tanks in obtaining gasoline for their vanpools.

By the end of 1979, the situation had changed: there was no shortage of fuel, prices were rising steadily but slowly, and growth began to slow. However, more than 95 employer programs were already in existence and inertia carried the program forward. San Antonio and Dallas were actively marketing vanpooling. A concentrated effort by the city ridesharing office in Dallas resulted in the initiation of 30 new programs in late 1979 and early 1980. By comparison, growth in Houston slowed because the existing programs were reaching maturity and the newer programs were still small.

In summary, the period of most-rapid growth occurred during summer and fall 1979. It occurred in locations where fuel was scarcest and most expensive. Growth occurred because a large number of small pilot projects were already under way and because vanpool material was in the hands of receptive employers before the crisis occurred. In other words, the mechanism was in place before the crisis occurred.

STATEWIDE COORDINATION

In 1978 no other state agency was interested in promoting vanpooling, and TENRAC fell heir to the leadership of the statewide vanpool program by default. TENRAC's main problem was how best to conduct the program. There are two basic approaches to conducting such a program. The safe option is to play a numbers game and simply conduct the required workshops and meetings according to plan. The more risky option is to attack targets of opportunity and concentrate on them until the vans are on the road, regardless of workshop goals. Our basic approach turned out to be a combination of these two options (we also hit both targets--1500 vans and the required 72 workshops). The significant deviation from the original plan was that we attacked the targets of opportunity and paid little attention to the sequence of workshops. On-site meetings with employers were often held before meetings with (or without) the local MPO. The lack of competition from other state agencies allowed us to structure the program without regard to who got credit for each program and grant.

The next issue was how to coordinate a statewide program that had no real authority or responsibility to do so--our grant from DOE specified the conduct of a series of workshops but not the coordination of a statewide program. We have not forced the issue on this problem and do not, in any event, wish to see the creation of a vanpool hierarchy. We use three indirect techniques that provide the ridesharing effort with a sense of direction:

1. The vanpool census serves as a vehicle to communicate with the entire vanpool community at least four times a year;
2. The fuel-allocation office, which is housed in TENRAC, is sensitive to the gasoline needs of the vanpool programs and assists them as much as possible; and
3. The state ridesharing committee, which was finally established (on an unofficial basis) in July 1980, tackles regulatory and legal problems faced by the vanpool community.

The final problem is, How do two part-timers conduct a statewide promotional effort? (We work for the project on a half-time basis, aided by two half-time administrative assistants and graduate research assistants as available.) The answer is: You train as many vanpool salespersons as you can, provide them with some incentive to sell, and give all the technical and moral support you can. We have also tried to see that the sales force received the bulk of the publicity and credit for their efforts.

The first group of salespeople we assisted in this way were staff from the existing ridesharing projects in Houston, Dallas, Fort Worth, and San Antonio. San Antonio was the first to market vanpooling; however, their market is primarily public agencies, and results are hard to achieve. Dallas Rideshare, in cooperation with the Dallas Chamber of Commerce, began to market vanpooling, in addition to their carpool effort, in July 1979. The results during the following year were outstanding--25 new programs. Houston and Fort Worth have been kept busy handling the many responses to their outstanding carpool efforts. In addition, Houston has assisted in initiating third-party operations at Greenway Plaza and the City Post Oak Center.

In the spring 1979, TENRAC and the State Department of Highways and Public Transportation developed a good working relationship to promote vanpooling. (This was all accomplished at the working level through long-time professional relationships.) The State Department of Highways and Public Transportation district offices have arranged and cohosted 12 workshops and meetings in their respective areas. This effort has netted six possible new programs in areas of the state not usually on the workshop circuit (i.e., the small towns). We consider this a very important effort because of the potential for breaking the one-car-one-passenger syndrome in the rural areas.

Another very important source of contacts is the network of equipment providers: primary manufacturers, van conversion firms, fleet managers, and leasing companies. Their motivation, of course, is to sell or lease vans. We feel that it is necessary to educate this group so that they do not oversell vanpooling or distribute misinformation. These people generally know the large employers on a business basis, and they are skilled salespeople; therefore, they should not be overlooked.

Probably the most effective force for the expansion of vanpooling has been the vanpool coordinators themselves. Many of these people have very unselfishly shared their experiences with others in starting programs or considering doing so. The Houston chapter of NAVPO has been an especially effective advocate. In order to avoid duplicating their efforts, we have not pursued opportunities that have occurred in Houston as aggressively as we might have.

CONCLUSIONS

The result of this effort over a two-year period has been the development of a large number (90 percent of the vans) of employer vanpools. Employers have come to realize that they have a stake in how their employees get to work. Although this is expressed differently by various employers, the principal concerns are expansion and protection of the labor market, reduction of parking costs, and public relations. The employer's enlightened self-interest, which is evidenced by those concerns, is the key to the success of vanpooling in Texas. This is the main reason the period of rapid growth occurred during the past two years.

If the employer is appealed to on the basis of this self-interest and reasonable tax shelters are provided for the purchase of vans, employers will put the vans on the road. The point to remember is that people will not put vans on the road merely to capture the tax break (or to reduce pollution or to save energy); they must have a stronger reason, such as saving money. The tax breaks only make the program more attractive by reducing the fares to the riders to a reasonable $30-45/month for an average 50-mile daily trip.

Our experience in Texas makes clear that a tsar of vanpooling is not a requirement for a successful statewide program. The key is to build a vanpool (or ridesharing) community and guide its development. Otherwise, there is a real danger that the tzar will market his or her own brand of vanpooling to the exclusion of others and, by doing so, will miss major targets of opportunity.

When the vanpool community in Texas consisted of 15-30 employers, four regional coordinators, Houston NAVPO, and TENRAC, coordination was easy. Now, however, TENRAC must coordinate 105 employers as well as newly interested state agencies. The danger is that too much time will be required in the coordination effort, and too little time left for contacting employers and assisting with technical problems.

Finally, the job of putting vanpools on the road is a selling job that requires an adequate budget (say, 20 percent of the total cost) for travel, conference expenses, and materials. The vanpool promoter must know the territory, know how to interest prospects in the product, and be available to answer questions and give assistance after the sale.

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# Multiemployer Ridesharing Brokerage: Findings from Minneapolis Commuter Services Demonstration

GLEN E. WEISBROD AND ELLYN S. EDER

**This paper presents findings from the evaluation of the Minneapolis ridesharing commuter services demonstration, a prototype transportation brokerage program designed to arrange alternatives to driving alone for commuters. The program promoted and coordinated services for carpooling, vanpooling, and bus commuting at selected employment sites in the Minneapolis-St. Paul area. A unique aspect of this demonstration was its focus on multiemployer work sites in nondowntown locations. The demonstration showed that these sites represent a potentially important market for ridesharing; however, program success can be dependent on a variety of critical site characteristics. A number of new program features were also tested, including a variety of marketing strategies, a telephone brokerage technique to assist carpool applicants, and the use of a private, third-party contractor for vanpool services. Findings from this demonstration can serve as a reference for other interested agencies to aid in indicating the type and range of issues they may confront in establishing a ridesharing program.**

The Minneapolis ridesharing commuter services demonstration, popularly known as the Share-A-Ride program, was a prototype transportation brokerage program designed to arrange alternatives to driving alone for commuters. It coordinated services for carpooling, vanpooling, and bus commuting to workers at selected employment sites in the Minneapolis-St. Paul area. Initiated by the Metropolitan Transit Commission (MTC) in 1977, the project was part of the Urban Mass Transportation Administration's (UMTA) Service and Methods Demonstration (SMD) program. The Share-A-Ride program has been designed to be a permanent, ongoing program, characterized by

1. Intensive marketing efforts aimed at employers and employees at selected sites;
2. Matching services for carpool, vanpool, and bus information applicants;
3. Follow-up assistance with carpool and vanpool formation; and
4. Administration of a fleet of leased vans.

The primary purpose of the program was to increase work-trip vehicle occupancy.

Key elements of this demonstration that differentiate it from previous ridesharing promotion efforts are the following: