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Getting there is Half the Fun:

Alternative Transportation and Oregon Library Employees

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When we think about sustainability and Oregon libraries, we may initially think about green buildings or recycling programs. There is another aspect though: How do employees of Oregon libraries get to work? This article examines that question informally and anecdotally.

An informal poll of my co-workers at the Oregon State Library, asking how they most often commute to work, revealed:

Drive alone: 11
Bus: 9
Walk: 5
Carpool: 3
Vanpool: 1
Bicycle: 1
Multi-modal: 2

While I suspect driving alone may be underreported—for fear that I would try to convince them to bicycle—I was glad to see that driving alone is not the most popular commute method.

Several factors may contribute to this. The State Library is located on the Capital Mall in Salem, where parking is expensive and can be scarce, especially when the legislature is in session. The State of Oregon has a Smart Commuter Program that offers employees who work on the Mall incentives to use alternate transportation. I pay \$10 a year for a safe room to lock my bicycle in during the day. For a one-time fee of \$8, I can receive an annual pass for unlimited bus rides. Those who use alternate transportation are eligible for two free parking passes per month and also receive a coupon book with good deals on restaurants, museums, etc.

I solicited information on the libs-or and OLA Support Staff Division discussion lists about Oregon library employees who use alternative transportation. While I had relatively few responses, those I received were full of interesting tidbits and valuable tips.

The Journey of a Thousand Miles Begins With a Single Step

Walking is the most basic form of human transportation. So basic, in fact, that we may not even consider it transportation. After all, is it transportation when we walk to the refrigerator? Yet walking is the preferred commuting option for some.

Jules Filipski (Southern Oregon University Library) walks to work for a number of reasons: “I walk in order to live more simply and sustainably. I walk for health reasons. I walk for financial reasons. As a library technician, I don’t make much money; my salary is definitely lower than a living wage for Ashland.”

Tiffany Thornton (University of Oregon) appreciates the time for observation and contemplation her walk to work provides. Initially, recovering from a torn ligament “gave me a new appreciation for the bipedal locomotion that our species is famous for.” While she acknowledges that walking definitely exposes her to the elements, there are compensations: “During a particularly brutal walk home on a scorching day, I passed a woman watering her garden, and requested to be hosed down. She obliged, and I felt much better.”

Because walking doesn’t involve any kind of vehicle at all, pedestrian commuters may have unique personal safety issues. Here are Tiffany’s tips for walking to work:

- Pay careful attention when crossing streets, especially if there are no stop signs or crosswalks, and be aware that cars parked at the curb can hide oncoming traffic from view.
- Be aware of cyclists and fellow pedestrians sharing space with you on sidewalks or road shoulders.
- Make sure that if you feel uncomfortable walking for whatever reason, you have a backup plan. If there are people you can call for a lift, store their numbers in your



cell phone. Familiarize yourself with the schedules and stops for buses that run near your home and workplace.

The nicest thing about walking to work is its simplicity. Joel Henderson (Oregon State Library) sums it up nicely: “My feet are two of the most reliable modes of transportation out there. They’re on time and on call 24/7. I’m a big fan.”

Another One Rides the Bus (or the Train, or ...)

Riding the bus is perhaps the least glamorous of alternative transportation options. While many of my co-workers ride the bus to work, few public transit riders responded to my post on *libs-or*. The ones who did, however, turned out to be mega-commuters.

Michael Thommen (Oregon State Library) rides the bus most days from his home in Dallas to his job in Salem. He calls the CARTS bus he rides “a much-overlooked opportunity for people living in the ‘bedroom communities’ of Salem.” Even though CARTS costs \$3 per day, Michael still comes out ahead: “Figuring in wear and tear, parking, and the occasional traffic ticket, three bucks is a very good deal.”

Judith Norton (OHSU Library) uses three kinds of public transit to commute to her job on “Pill Hill”: “My morning routine is to WALK to the bus stop; take the BUS to downtown; transfer to the STREETCAR; and then take the TRAM to OHSU. It takes a little bit longer than transferring to another bus downtown, but much more enjoyable, as I can pretend I am in Europe somewhere.”

Barbara Yasson (Washington County Cooperative Library Service) spends four hours a day commuting to and from her home in Vancouver, Washington, to her job in Hillsboro. She drives to the Expo Center Park & Ride and takes the MAX train from there. While many would find her commute daunting, Barbara makes good use of her



Barbara Yasson with MAX.

time—from studying for a class in SQL to reading Harry Potter. For reading on public transportation, Barbara suggests books that aren’t too large and that are in good condition. See the sidebar for her suggested MAX reads.

I Want to Ride My Bicycle

The majority of those who responded to my *libs-or* message were bicycle commuters. Are bicycle commuters just naturally more vocal? As a bicycle commuter myself, I’m not in a position to judge. Perhaps there are just more of us: bicycling combines the independence of driving a car with the exercise and environmental benefits of walking, so perhaps more library folks choose it. Whatever the reason, Oregon library bicycle commuters had a variety of experiences to share.

Dave Pauli (Hillsboro Public Library) bicycles several times a week from his home in Forest Grove, sometimes combining bicycling with the MAX train when he doesn’t want to cycle the whole seven miles. He recommends that anyone interested in commuting by bicycle “make it a part of your life and build it into your commute expectations. Once you have made that transition, there are many benefits.”

Cathy Flynn (University of Oregon) is not currently a bicycle commuter. However, for 12 years, she not only commuted by bicycle, but also used a bicycle trailer to drop off and pick up her daughter at day care. She’s currently driving the middle school car

Barbara Yasson’s list of good MAX reads

Young Adult:

Philip Pullman’s
His Dark Materials Series
& Sally Lockhart Trilogy

Carl Hiaasen’s *Hoot and Flush*

Any Harry Potter or
Star Wars title.

Biographies:

Personal History
by Katharine Graham

The Roosevelt Women
by Betty Boyd Caroli

*Women of Mystery: The Lives
and Works of Notable Women
Crime Novelists*

by Martha Hailey Dubose

Mysteries & Spy Novels:

Lord Peter Wimsey, along with
any of a dozen others,
by Dorothy L. Sayers

Anything by Agatha Christie or
Arthur Conan Doyle

John Le Carre’s
George Smiley Adventures

Most mysteries, spy novels and
science fiction read well on MAX.

Nonfiction:

*The Code Book: The Evolution of
Secrecy From Mary, Queen of Scots
to Quantum Cryptography*
by Simon Singh

Looking for Alaska
by Peter Jenkins

Robert L. Wolke’s scientific miscel-
lany *What Einstein Told His Barber*
& *What Einstein Told His Cook*

The Powers That Be
by David Halberstam



Melissa Hartley's panniers.



Kyle Banerjee in his Tadpole Trike.

pool, but hopes to be back to biking soon.

Erin O'Meara (University of Oregon) enjoys her 1.5 mile commute on one of Eugene's many bike paths. Although secure bicycle parking is a concern, Erin enjoys the camaraderie of the bike rack: "It's like our water cooler. People from different departments have a moment to chat and catch up, when otherwise they might not see each other that often."

Will Harmon (University of Oregon) rides to get aerobic exercise, save on gas, and observe wildlife. He says, "I most especially like the bike path running west from 15th Street, following the Amazon slough towards Fern Ridge: ducks, herons, fish, turtles, an occasional eagle, nutria (for what they're worth), raccoons, snakes, and a beaver dam on the small stream running along West Roosevelt."

Sustainability isn't just about alternative transportation, as Melissa Hartley (Oregon State University) proves. Melissa commutes by bicycle and appreciates the efforts of OSU's Alternative Transportation Advisory Committee in supporting alternative transportation. Melissa finds that driving to work actually takes her longer than bicycling, since parking at OSU is scarce. Melissa is an all-weather bicyclist and has made a pair of

rainproof panniers from OCLC WorldCat backpacks that she picked up at ALA.

The mega-commuter of the Oregon library biking community is Kyle Banerjee (Orbis Cascade Alliance). Kyle bicycles from his home in Monmouth to his office in Corvallis; prior to joining Orbis, Kyle bicycled from Monmouth to his job at the State Library in Salem. Like some other bicycle commuters, Kyle finds that bicycling doesn't add much to his commute time, especially when factoring in parking time.

Unlike other alternative transportation options, bicycling can require special clothing, and this can cause occasional minor mishaps. Dave Pauli once arrived at work wearing bicycling shorts, then realized he'd forgotten to bring pants to change into. And I once spent several hours wondering why my pants were so tight before discovering that I'd absent-mindedly put them on over my bike shorts after arriving at work.

Here are some of tips from Cathy Flynn and Kyle Banerjee for a safe and enjoyable bicycle commute:

- Act like a slow moving vehicle and obey traffic laws.
- Wear highly visible clothing and use good lights at night.



- Wear a helmet.
- Use mirrors.
- Pay attention to traffic.
- Buy equipment that fits you correctly.
- Build a relationship with a local bike shop that will give you continuing support.

If you feel guilty about spending a lot of money, think about how much you're saving on gas, parking, and gym fees!

What's the Alternative?

No one responding to my libs-or message said "I'd really rather drive, but ..." about their decision to use alternative transportation. Walking, biking, or taking public transit lessens our impact on the environment. Walking and biking give us an opportunity to exercise without going to the gym. Public transportation gives us time to read, listen to music or books, text our friends, or just sit, without having to worry about traffic at all. Sure, pedestrians and bicyclists encounter the occasional aggressive driver or scary dog. Public transportation riders may have to tolerate crowded buses or fellow passengers they'd rather avoid. But Oregon library alternative transportation users enjoy their commutes. For them, it's not alternative transportation, it's just the way they get to work. Kyle Banerjee puts it this way: "Because bikes are very practical on many levels, I've never been a fan of considering them as an alternative form of transportation. To me, the very word 'alternative' implies a non-preferred solution. The reality is that for many people, bicycles are a fun, healthy, fast, and cheap way to get around."

What can Oregon libraries do to encourage their staff and patrons to try alternative transportation? Here are some ideas:

- Provide low-cost or free bus passes.
- Ensure that staff and patrons have information about public transit routes that stop near the library.

- Provide bicycle storage, such as lockers or a room, to keep bikes safe from damage and theft.
- Provide lockers, room for staff to change clothes, and maybe even a shower!
- Consider other incentives for employees who use public transportation.

Whether it's because of high gas prices, concerns about global warming, wanting more exercise, or just to try something different, getting to work by an "alternative" method is definitely worth a try. You may find it's more fun than driving! 🌿

Resources

Bicycle Transportation Alliance.
<http://www.bta4bikes.org>

National Center for Bicycling and Walking.
<http://www.bikewalk.org>

Oregon Transportation and Growth Management Program. Transportation Choices.
<http://www.oregon.gov/LCD/TGM/GettingAround.shtml>



Jey Wann reading the rules of the road.

