



Gas Is So Cheap!

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While everyone else in the country seems to be complaining about high gas prices are, I'm lamenting how cheap it is compared to Amtrak.

I'm planning a trip from NYC to Washington DC for the weekend and I wanted to see if the new gas prices at \$3-3.50 would make Amtrak more competitive for two people to take the train instead of drive. NY Penn Station to Union Station in DC is about as well traveled an intra-city rail connection as there is in the country. It only takes about three and a half hours each way and trains run pretty much every hour.

So let's do the math on the incentives to drive vs. take the train, assuming we simply park the car when we arrive and do not use it for anything except intracity transportation:

Amtrak ticket: \$80 each way, \$160 roundtrip (no discount for RT!)

2004 Honda Civic: 250 miles, 30 mpg, assume \$3 and \$3.50/gallon gas = \$25-30/each way. That's really cheap compared to the \$80 Amtrak tickets.

Not that most people factor this into their plans, but gas is only a fraction of the cost of using a car for this trip. Let's assume parking is \$25 each night x 3 nights. Tolls will be another \$15 each way (bridge/NJ Turnpike/Tunnel). That brings us up to a total roundtrip cost for the car to \$155-165. Ok that's competitive on the margin for one person to take the train, but remember this was a two person trip, meaning the car costs would be cut in half. This is the power of carpooling.

For me this exposed several issues:

1. Despite all the groaning out there about gas prices, I truly doubt that this will change behaviors except for some financially strapped people on the margins who really can't afford to pay for the extra gas. Gas is a pretty good value at \$3/gallon.
2. Amtrak needs better funding to compete with the auto/airline industry. I think the government should take on more of the burden of investing in improving the rail infrastructure (like it does for highways!) and start to introduce more competition for regional passenger rail services. Even drivers should support these proposals because this takes cars off the road - less traffic.
3. Having alternatives helps you make solid financial calculations to decide what your incentives are, but unfortunately for many people there is no alternative to their car. We need to identify opportunities to expand mass transit into suburban communities, assuming they become interested in increasing their range of choices.

Ultimately I convinced my travel companion to take the train simply to do our part for lowering consumption during our time of need. So there is my contribution for the cause this weekend.



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