

NORTHWEST HERALD

Most McHenry County commuters drive to work alone, data shows

Carpooling, working at home were next most popular options

Published: Sunday, Jan. 3, 2016 11:41 p.m. CST • Updated: Monday, Jan. 4, 2016 12:01 a.m. CST



Caption
(Matthew Apgar – mapgar@shawmedia.com)

cswieca@shawmedia.com

About 82 percent of McHenry County residents get to work by driving alone, according to data from the U.S. Census Bureau's latest [American Community Survey](#).

That percentage is third-highest among counties in the Chicago region, according to an analysis of that data by the Chicago Metropolitan Agency for Planning.

A December policy update by CMAP studied commuting data from Cook, DuPage, Kane, Kendall, Lake, McHenry and Will counties.

Across the region, the agency found the amount of single-occupant vehicle trips to work has remained about constant since 2000, stopping a rising trend that had spanned the 1980s and '90s.

“We would prefer to see higher percentages of other modes – either carpooling or mass transit – because there are broad benefits to that,” said Liz Schuh, principal policy analyst at CMAP. “But I think we’re encouraged that it has leveled off.”

While driving alone was clearly the dominant form of transportation – at least 75 percent of drivers in each suburban area get to work that way – analysts also are seeing some shift in the mix of other commuting methods.

Regionally, there has been a steady decline in carpooling. It remained the second most-popular commuting mode in McHenry County, with nearly 8 percent of respondents using it.

The third most-popular category in the county was telecommuters, a group that has grown regionally over time.

McHenry County ranked second among the studied counties with 5.5 percent of respondents working from home.

Less than 3 percent of county respondents used any form of public transportation, with commuter rail accounting for about 2.3 percent.

That number is in line with the 2.5 percent of residents who work in the city of Chicago, according to 2013 census data.

CMAP transportation planner Elizabeth Irvin, one of the primary authors of the policy update, said the low numbers were about what researchers expected because most people who live in the suburbs also work there.

Data from 2011 included in the McHenry County 2040 Long Range Transportation Plan showed that about a third of residents stay in the county to work. The plan, written by the Division of Transportation, listed promoting mobility for all residents and providing transportation choices as two of its main long-term goals.

Irvin said CMAP works in formal and informal ways with suburban transportation officials to discuss how public transit options can be improved and promoted.

Ken Koehler, who represents the county on the Metra Board, said there are potential future projects that would make the service more efficient for McHenry County riders.

If Metra were able to complete a planned coach yard facility in [Woodstock](#), the train could add cars and express trains to make commutes faster, he said.

Recently, the Department of Transportation awarded a [\\$14 million grant](#) to help replace the outdated bridge over the Fox River that services Metra's Milwaukee District West Line. A new bridge must be built before Metra seriously considered a previously discussed expansion to [Huntley](#) and [Marengo](#), Koehler said.

Additionally, [federal legislation](#) was unveiled in December that would increase the tax break transit users could receive to \$255.

"That should cause a lot of people to have a lot more interest in taking the train," Koehler said. "It does help offset the cost of the train significantly."

While planners will continue to promote eco-friendly transit methods across the region, Irvin said she was encouraged by the slow changes happening over time.

"There's a variety of factors that are impacting mode share and the choices people make about where they're going to live and where they work and how they're going to get between the two," Irvin said. "Those things aren't going to change overnight."