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## Cost of the commute: time and money

*Even before gas got so expensive, some Twin Cities commuters were fed up with what the trips cost them in time. They fixed it by moving -- jobs, houses or both.*

H.J. Cummins, Star Tribune

Adam Powell's commute is a leisurely 20-minute bike ride from his south Minneapolis house to the VA Medical Center, where he works as a medical treatment research coordinator.

There's a coffee shop along the way, neighborhood garden smells -- lilacs, most recently -- and the Minnehaha Falls bike trail.

This is no happy coincidence. When house hunting, Powell was contemplating two job offers: one at the VA and another at a firm near the Hiawatha light rail line in Bloomington. He was determined to find a neighborhood within bike-riding distance of the VA hospital -- he was leaning toward that offer -- and close to light rail -- just in case he went the other way.

The Hiawatha neighborhood met his commuting requirements.

The old American dream is to find a good job and a nice home and then put up with whatever it takes to get from one to the other.

No more.

Cost is one compelling reason for the change. For every \$10,000 saved in yearly commuting expenses -- and more than half of Twin Cities households spend at least that -- a family could afford to spend about \$100,000 more on their home, according to a report from the Brookings Institution and the Center for Transit-Oriented Development.

But even before gas headed toward \$3 a gallon, Powell and others were already fed up by the cost in time. And they started arranging work and house choices around their trips to work.

One Twin Cities man moved to downtown Minneapolis and then looked for work there. Another moved his business closer to his home. A family moved from the suburbs into an old St. Paul neighborhood. And a business consultant drew a line beyond which she would take no clients.

Not everyone is down on commuting, Twin Cities builders are quick to say. Most buyers shrug off 30 minutes, these builders say. Besides, plenty of jobs are coming closer to suburban neighborhoods, as with Target Corporation's plan to significantly expand its Brooklyn Park complex.

But there are more people like Powell than employers know, according to a recent survey of almost 14,000 employees by compensation consultant [Salary.com](http://Salary.com). Managers guessed that benefits,

compensation and friendly co-workers were most important for job satisfaction. But employees ranked their top three as: friendly co-workers, good managers and a "desirable commute."

Those anti-commuters are stirring the Twin Cities real estate market. The first phase of Reflections condominiums, 267 units along the light rail line in Bloomington, is 90 percent sold, and a big residential and retail project is proposed near the 38th Street station in Minneapolis.

"I think people want two very important things in our time," said Noah Bly, managing principal at UrbanWorks Architecture in Minneapolis, one of the firms working on the 38th Street project. "They wish they had more time. Everyone feels harried and stressed out and unable to do all the things they're supposed to be doing, parenting or work or hobbies.

"And I think we all wish we had more community," he said. "People are searching for connections."

### **The moving pieces**

Tony and Carley Sonnen sold their dream house in Lake Elmo only two years after they moved in because of Tony's commute to his Brooklyn Park office, SP Developers, which specializes in marketing and developing commercial spaces.

"It was a big decision, because we built that house and planned to live in it forever," Tony Sonnen said. "A year into it we realized it wasn't worth it. You think you're going to create this great quality of life for yourself and your family, and then you realize you're spending two hours a day in a car."

They bought a house in the Macalester-Groveland neighborhood in St. Paul. They walk to the grocery store. They take their children, ages 1 and 3, to neighborhood cafes for breakfast. It cut Sonnen's commute by 20 minutes.

Then he moved his company to Spring Lake Park, which lopped off another five to eight minutes, he said.

Now, instead of three or four tanks of gas a week, he buys only one.

They sold their Lake Elmo house -- to a couple moving from a Summit Avenue condo.

"My wife and I looked at each other and said, 'They won't last long,' " Sonnen said.

Isanti-based software consultant Carol Novak said she got a taste of long commutes when she took a project in Eden Prairie.

"I told myself, 'It is only four months, I can do it,' " Novak said. "Yeah, that was before the construction on Highways 169 and 55."

One-way commutes could take an hour and a half.

"I am now consulting in Arden Hills, and I have my life back," she said. "And I have made the decision that I will never work south of Hwy. 394."

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Builder Scott Richter, president of Centex Homes Minnesota, said company surveys show that most buyers aren't concerned about commutes longer than 30 minutes and many are unfazed by those up to an hour, as long as the neighborhood comes with Minnesotans' favorite amenities: good schools, convenient shopping and restaurants, and a lake or park nearby.

### **Public transportation**

Projects along the light rail line are part of an urban trend called Transit-Oriented Developments, or TODs. As the name implies, the transit system comes first and then development happens around it.

The Reflections condos at the Bloomington Central Station are part of bigger plans that include hotels and office space, said Laurence Harmon of McGough Development.

"The train is the most important identity for a mixed-use village like this on a rail line," Harmon said. "We're learning that it's more important than restaurants or any service amenity."

Realtor Jim Seabold sees a growing number of clients taking another tack in cutting their drive times, if not costs: reverse commuting.

"There is a whole group of buyers who want to be part of the urban environment," said Seabold, a Coldwell Banker Burnet Realtor who specializes in downtown St. Paul. "So they live in the city and they work at 3M or General Mills or Land O' Lakes, and they reverse-commute."

Yet another approach is a bit of a gamble, and a reminder how fluid all this can be.

Matt Bertolatus used to live in Uptown and ride a bus to his U.S. Bank office in downtown Minneapolis. When the bank transferred him to St. Paul, he drove to work for a while.

But Bartolatus decided that he wanted to live in downtown Minneapolis. So he moved, gambling that he would find a job, and it paid off -- professionally, because U.S. Bank transferred his job back there, but also literally.

"The money isn't the reason I made the change, but I save at least \$100 a month between gas and parking," he said.

But couldn't the bank transfer him again?

"That is a concern," Bartolatus said. "I'm not sure what would happen in that case."

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