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What's on road ahead?

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By KELLY HANNON

When Generation Y starts commuting to work, slugging might move online.

The informal carpools that form in parking lots could instead be formed on social networking sites such as Facebook or MySpace.

Demographer John W. Martin told George Washington Regional Commission staff yesterday that Generation Y--people born after 1982--are constantly updating their whereabouts in real-time through text messaging, cell phones and the Web.

This need for constant social interaction and feedback means ridesharing will come naturally to them, said Martin, who is CEO of the Southeastern Institute of Research in Richmond.

"They're so hyperconnected," Martin said.

Generation Y's interest in the environment, volunteerism and civic duty will combine with this trend, Martin said.

During the summer spike in gas prices, all age groups said they reduced their driving--but the greatest reduction was among Generation Y drivers, Martin said.

But that does not mean agencies like GWRideConnect will go away.

The free ride-matching service in the Fredericksburg area gets plenty of phone calls.

"Up until this point, it seems for every one who wants to do it themselves, there's somebody who appreciates having someone there to help them," said Diana Utz, director of GW RideConnect.

But the ride-matching service for the greater Washington area, Commuter Connections, does have an online matching system, Utz said.



And insights into future commuter behavior are beneficial. "Anything is possible," Utz said. "I think it's very important to reach the market."

Martin's agency, which specializes in marketing research, was hired by the Virginia Department of Rail and Public Transportation to study how demographics would affect travel and transportation.

Martin is a co-author of "Boomer Consumer," a book that discusses marketing strategies that target adults born between 1946 and 1964.

His firm has studied later generations, too, and Martin thinks the 80 million members of Generation Y will some day rival the impact of the 78 million baby boomers.

Though many Generation Y members are still in school, they have already organized online. According to Martin's presentation, if MySpace were a country, it would be the 11th largest nation in the world.

This technology-savvy population will be comfortable working on the go, and telecommuting will undergo a shift, Martin predicted.

Generation Y workers will demand greater schedule flexibility to balance family and social time.

Baby boomers see work as part of their identity, and will be reluctant to stop working completely. Other boomers are not even contemplating retirement, Martin said.

With boomers, "you can have kids in college or you can have a brand-new baby," Martin said.

For both generations, "Work is going to be something you do, not somewhere you go," Martin said.

Around 4 million workers telecommuted in 1990. Today, that number has grown to 24 million people. By 2010, 40 million people will work from off-site locations, Martin predicted.

Soon enough, even the language to describe the practice will change.

"Telework is really remote work," Martin said. "It's work. Eventually, work is going to be work no matter where it's done."

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