Pittsburgh Post-Gazette
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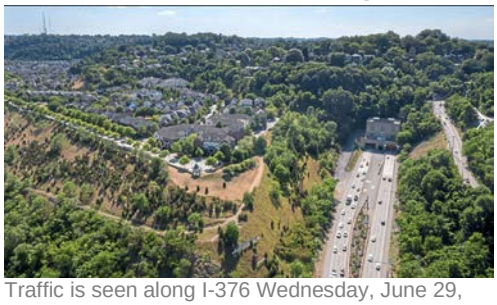
THURSDAY, JUNE 30, 2022

HITTING THE ROAD - High gas prices won't put brakes on plans for Fourth of July travel

FRONT PAGE



Traffic is seen along I-376 Wednesday, June 29, 2022, at the east side of the Squirrel Hill Tunnel in Squirrel Hill South. (Morgan Timms/Post-Gazette)

PennDOT's Yasmeen Manyisha speaks about the importance of boating and driving safety at a news conference Wednesday on the North Shore.(Mary Flavin/Post-Gazette)

Nick Pasion
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As millions of people prepare to push off for Independence Day weekend, they will travel alongside record inflation levels that have pushed Pennsylvania's gas prices 43% higher than they were this time last year, according to AAA.

Pennsylvania gas prices have stalled just below $5 a gallon, but AAA predicts 47.9 million people in the United States will travel during the Fourth of July holiday weekend, with 42 million people opting to hit the road. In the mid-Atlantic region — Pennsylvania, New York and New Jersey — about 6 million are planning to travel, whether it be via plane, train, car or bus, to celebrate Independence Day.

This time last year, in Pennsylvania, the average gallon of gas cost about $3.20, while this year those prices have jumped to about $4.94 per gallon, according to AAA, although Sheetz has lowered its prices for the holiday weekend to $3.99 for a gallon of unleaded 88 and $3.49 for a gallon of E85.

This year's nationwide holiday traveler total is a 3.7% uptick from 47.7 million in 2021, but remains below the pre-pandemic 2019 total.

PennDOT had some good news and some cautions for motorists.

Spokesperson Yasmeen Manyisha said some construction projects on the interstate system will take a "temporary hiatus" to clear the way.

"Please don't let the holiday be an excuse to break all the safe practices and break laws on the road," she said at a press conference focused on encouraging vehicular and boat safety Wednesday.

Ms. Manyisha emphasized the number of accidents that happen when operating a vehicle while impaired also increases during the holiday season. She said there were 26 fatalities in the state due to vehicle crashes on the Fourth of July last year.

Officials said at the news conference that there will also be more officers on the road over the weekend who will be posted in areas with a historically high volume of crashes.

There was a 17% increase in traffic fatalities across the commonwealth between 2019 and 2021, even though 2021 had fewer vehicle miles traveled than 2019, according to a report on U.S. traffic fatalities from the TRIP transportation research group.

To avoid traffic-heavy, road-rage-inducing trips, traffic data analytics company INRIX and AAA recommend that drivers avoid the roads on Thursday and Friday afternoons and instead, on those days, they should try to hit the road in the early morning or late at night.

And on Saturday, the roads will be clearer before noon and after 7 p.m. but will fill back up with traffic in the early afternoon.

Roads should remain relatively traffic-free Sunday and Monday, AAA reported.

If your celebrations will be on a boat this year, officials emphasized the importance of avoiding impaired sailing, keeping life jackets on hand, and remaining patient when going through the Allegheny and Monongahela rivers' lock and dam system.

"People don't realize if they go for a swim off the back of the boat, sometimes they get themselves in trouble. The rivers here in Pittsburgh have currents, and sometimes people get swept away from the boats," said Waterways Conservation Officer Michael Johnson.

Those flying to their celebration location will join a AAA estimated 566,000 people in Pennsylvania over the weekend.

Bob Kerlik, a spokesperson for Allegheny County Airport Authority, said that between June 30 and July 5, an estimated 145,000 passengers will move through Pittsburgh International Airport, which is about on par with passenger totals pre-pandemic in 2019.

But whether you are staying in Pittsburgh or headed to the shore, summer storms may be on the way on the Fourth.

Myranda Fullerton, a National Weather Service meteorologist, said that as of Wednesday, the Pittsburgh region is expecting temperatures in the 80s on Monday, with possible thunderstorms in the afternoon.

"What the models are hinting at is that it's going to be warm and humid, which may lead to isolated chances for afternoon thunderstorms," she said.

On the New Jersey shore, there will be partly cloudy skies throughout Independence Day. Then in the afternoon, the region will experience a chance of showers as temperatures climb into the high 80s.

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