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## Crowds, cost unlikely to deter holiday drivers

By Larry Copeland

Stephen Vance and his family will load up their Ford SUV in Pittsburgh Wednesday afternoon and head out to spend Thanksgiving with relatives in Long Island, N.Y. It's a 422-mile, eight-hour trip, and it requires planning.

Vance, 48, will time the drive to avoid rush hour traffic on both ends. He'll make sure the family eats before they hit the road. "I also take some light snacks — sliced pepperoni, cut-up cheese and some crackers," he says, plus bottled water and chocolate bars.

His driving strategy: "I shouldn't be getting passed by everything on the road ... nor should I be riding someone's bumper trying to pass. I try and stay 'in harmony' with the road."

The Vances will be among a record number of Americans taking trips of at least 50 miles this Thanksgiving week, according to travel club AAA. The group predicts 38.3 million people will travel more than 50 miles from home this year, an increase of 2.7% over 2005. About 31.7 million travelers will go by automobile, a 2.6% increase from 2005, AAA says.

Gas prices, which average \$2.23 a gallon for self-serve regular, are about 9 cents cheaper than a year ago, AAA says. Prices are considerably lower than they were on Memorial Day, Independence Day and Labor Day, AAA spokesman Mike Pina says. "Because gas prices have dipped, this has become the first holiday weekend this year where a significant increase (in travel) is expected," Pina says.

Travelers will find more expensive hotels, airfares and car rentals, according to AAA's Leisure Travel Index.

Heavy traffic and higher prices are unlikely to dissuade many from traveling, says Greg Cohen, CEO of the American Highway Users Alliance, a coalition of automakers, construction companies, auto clubs and bus companies.

"I think it's going to have to get a lot worse before folks don't want to see the family on Thanksgiving," he says. "For most folks, it's like you can't cancel Christmas, you can't cancel Thanksgiving. We are willing to go out and face a difficult trip in order to be with our loved ones."

Not Don Agren, a florist in Chester, Va. He and his family used to drive to Rhode Island for the holiday. "We don't travel anymore over Thanksgiving," he says. "We have been stuck in too many traffic jams in Northern Virginia."

In coming years, travelers may be able to avoid routes where crashes and delays are common.

Researchers in Alabama and Ohio analyze when, where and why traffic accidents occur during the Thanksgiving holiday, traditionally the worst holiday for wrecks:

- Researchers at the University of Alabama say the Wednesday before Thanksgiving generally has been the most dangerous day to travel in the state. But last year, they found, more crashes occurred on the Monday before and the Monday after Thanksgiving than the Wednesday before the holiday. "By spreading out the traffic patterns over the entire holiday week, there are more crashes earlier in the week," says Allen Parrish, professor of computer science. "This makes Wednesdays potentially a little safer than when everyone was on the road at the same time."

- This year, Ohio Highway Patrol troopers are using a forecasting model developed by researchers at Ohio State University to predict where serious crashes will occur.

The model, based on five years of state crash data, is believed to be the first of its kind in the nation, says Lt. Tony Bradshaw, a patrol spokesman. "We have about 55 patrol posts, and those commanders can use this model to see where the problem areas are," Bradshaw says. "The public can use it as well to determine areas they might want to avoid or use with added caution."

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