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Funny how small talk with people has shifted from the weather to complaining about gas prices these days. From the grocery store to neighbors to the people pumping gas at the station.

One of the simplest ways to save money on gas is simply to be wise when making your next automotive purchase. Do you really need that formidable SUV, or would a smaller vehicle that gets three times the mileage suffice.

One of my co-workers had a big SUV and downsized to a KIA. Now, she's smiling when she fill up her tank. It now costs her $42.00 for a fill up at 4.00 a gallon. I put $40 in my tank and it only goes to a quarter of a tank.

Whatever automobile you choose, make sure you keep it tuned up and properly maintained. That way, your car will run more smoothly and use less gas in the process.

I don't track my MPG or even look at the receipt when I fill up. The sad thing is that gas prices can really affect those barely making ends meet anyways. Fuel costs cannot be considered in a vacuum when it comes to their effect on consumers. A household with an annual income of $250,000 may not be bothered much by $5 gas . But a household with an annual income of

$35,000 could find $3.50 gas so expensive that cutbacks in other routine spending are necessary to offset the cost of driving.

Saving hundreds of bucks a year is worth spending maybe a hundred bucks keeping old Betsy running like a top, isn't it? And, here's a really easy one. Keep your tires inflated to the proper pressure. Even tires that are over inflated or under inflated by just a few pounds per square inch cause your car to use more fuel.

Check your owner's manual and the tires themselves for the proper pressure.

The gasoline crisis is just another factor in the economic times we are facing. With gas being well over four dollars do you eat or drive? RTA just rewarded a person who just recently started riding the bus because of the high price of gas.

If you had the $4 in your pocket, do you buy a three piece at Popeyes Chicken, get 2 Filet of Fish sandwiches at McDonalds, or put it in your gas tank? Could RTA really make money now with these gas prices?

The overall inflation rate remains fairly low but the costs of certain items have been rising for months, putting consumers who have to buy these items are under stress. While many expenses can be cut or postponed, it's hard to do anything about the budget items of food and gasoline. We have to eat and we have to get to work and back.

In fact, consumers do appear to be spending slightly less on food. We all know that gas and groceries are among our basic necessities. Both our commute and putting food on the table are getting more expensive and, for families already struggling to make ends meet, these added costs only make it more difficult.

I am starting to see demand destruction. We're starting to see people spend money less inside of restaurants, going out less. And, for the typical consumer who, let's say, got the break from the lower tax on the payroll (for Social Security), most of it is gone now. Most of it is gone away to pay for gasoline.

The next time you're gritting your teeth as you fill your tank with $4 gas, here's something to consider. Your pain is their gain. The last of the big five oil companies announced first-quarter earnings Friday, so the totals are in.

Between the five of them, Exxon Mobil, BP, Shell, Chevron, and ConocoPhillips made $34 billion in profits in the first three months of 2011, up 42 percent from a year ago. That's about $110 for every man, woman, and child in the United States in just three months.

Exxon alone cleared a cool $10.7 billion profit from January through March, up 69 percent from 2010. That's $82,175 a minute. Gas prices shoot up when oil prices shoot up and, when oil prices shoot up for reasons that have nothing to do with how much it costs to bring it out of the ground, it's a windfall for the folks who produce it.

The average cost to produce a barrel of oil, including exploration, development, extraction and taxes, is about $30, according to a U.S. Energy Information Administration survey . The going rate to buy one is about $113.

And while the pain is widely felt, consider all the Wal-Mart shoppers who are agonizing over how to make it to the end of the month as the benefits are not being widely shared. By and large, the oil companies' profits are not finding their way back into the communities from which they came, are not being used to create more jobs, and are not being invested in new equipment and exploration.

Some of that money is going back out the door in the form of larger dividends to stockholders. But, in the case of two of the big five in particular Exxon and ConocoPhillips , more than half of their total profits are being used to buy back their own stock .

Fully $5.7 billion of Exxon's haul went to buy back its own stock and the company announced that it expects to buy back yet another $5 billion's worth in the second quarter of the year. Conoco earned $3 billion in the first three months of 2011 and spent $1.6 billion of that to buy back 21 million of its own shares.

Buying back stock is not an uncommon tactic among publicly held companies, particularly when they experience a sudden and possibly temporary uptick in revenue. Buybacks are almost guaranteed to send stock prices up, by boosting earnings per outstanding share, increasing the demand for the stock and sending a signal that the company thinks its stock is undervalued.