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Gas-price hikes: good for Earth, tough on working families

Green gains likely to come disproportionately from lower-income households



AINSLIE CRUICKSHANK
STARMETRO VANCOUVER

Higher gas prices in Vancouver — which continued to hover around \$1.60 per litre on Thursday — might have some environmental upsides, according to a University of British Columbia economist.

Unfortunately, it's likely lower-income families in the region who are disproportionately feeling the pinch at the pumps, environmental and resource economics professor Sumeet Gulati warned on Thursday.

Gulati has spent years studying the effects of higher gas prices on people's behaviour. His research reveals that people, overall, do tend to drive less when gas prices go up.

But on that front, the rich are probably not pulling their weight. People on the bottom half of the income spectrum tend to use significantly less gas



Gas prices in Vancouver are the highest in North America, creating a strain for B.C. drivers, especially those with few other options.
JENNIFER GAUTHIER/
STARMETRO

in response to higher prices, Gulati's research found, while the upper half's consumption isn't effected much — even though wealthier people tend to live in areas with more transportation options than lower-income levels, he said.

"This less fortunate half also disproportionately bears the burden of increasing gasoline prices," Gulati said. "This is because the proportion of their income spent on energy consumption is higher than that for the rich."

For those earning less, though, it can be difficult to adjust their routine as quickly in response to climbing prices at the pumps.

Marc Lee, a senior economist

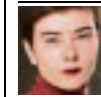
with the Canadian Centre for Policy Alternatives, said he's concerned about the effect the sudden rise in prices has on households who are "locked in" to their daily mode of transportation, with few alternative options.

Those families, he explained in a phone interview, can wind up "super squeezed in terms of their budget."

In the long-run, while Lee said gas prices will eventually need to rise along with efforts to reduce greenhouse gas emissions and air pollution, it would be better if that price increase came from carbon taxes, instead of the wallets of working families.

Full story at thestar.com

Better support needed to get people with MS, 'Canada's disease,' back in the labour force



ALEX MCKEEN
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Last year was rough for Melissa Hope. She suffered a retinal detachment in January, followed by persistent nerve pain which began in March. Then she had a mix of unexplained neurological symptoms in the summer.

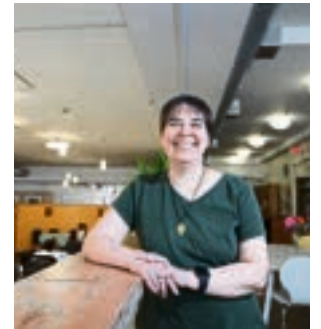
The combination of pills kept Hope, director of operations of the co-working space, HiVE, working at home. It was hard.

"Having to work from home when my job is to manage a co-working space was an extra piece of irony," she said. To do her job, she said she needed to "talk to humans, I need to see people."

Only after spending months working from home was Hope diagnosed with multiple sclerosis, a chronic autoimmune disease that causes damage to nerve cells that can be progressive or episodic.

Hope said she's been "fairly lucky" to be able to continue working full-time since her diagnosis — something not everyone living with MS can do.

That was the topic of a report released on Wednesday by the Conference Board of Canada, which concluded this country could improve its employment insurance benefits program to get more people with MS participating in the



Melissa Hope, director of operations at the co-working space, HiVE, was diagnosed with MS last year. She has since found her workplace to be a source of support. JENNIFER GAUTHIER/
STARMETRO

labour force.

The recommendation is especially relevant for Canada considering how many Canadians have MS.

"MS is unfortunately Canada's disease," said Benjamin Davis, vice president, government relations for the MS Society of Canada. "Canada has one of the highest rates of MS in the world."

The employment insurance sickness benefit allows employees in Canada to apply to receive up to 15 weeks of pay through the federal government when they are unable to work because of illness.

Learn more about how the EI sickness benefit may disqualify people with MS at thestar.com



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