

New App Creates Smooth Ride for Lamorinda Casual Carpoolers

By Sophie Braccini



Commuter Kevin Newby uses a new casual carpool service to get a ride into San Francisco as Alex Mooradian and Zach Burghardt make sure everything is OK. Photo Sophie Braccini

San Francisco commuters didn't mind standing in the cold for a few minutes at the Holy Shepherd Lutheran Church parking lot in Orinda recently before hopping in cars that were heading across the bay. These Moraga and Orinda residents are pioneering a new service through an app called Commutr that guarantees riders and drivers they'll find matches in 10 minutes or less on their morning commute to San Francisco. After a few hiccups in its first week before the holidays, Commutr is now up and running, and developers are already thinking of expanding to new locations.

"This is better than BART," says Laurie Tennant from Orinda. "You can't get parking after 7:30 at BART, the drop spot is closer to my office (she works south of Market), and it's nice to have a guaranteed seat!" Other commuters were equally enthusiastic about the service. Moraga resident Jon Waide says it's more regular than the bus. Roberto Castillo, also from Moraga, likes that the evening shuttle that brings you back to your car from BART is available every 10 minutes, compared to the bus's 40-minute intervals.

During this initial stage, commuters or drivers who have never used the service before are greeted at the pick-up location by Moraga resident Alex Mooradian or one of his partners to set things up. Commuters

should already have downloaded the app on their iPhones – the android version should be available within a month – on the website (www.getcommutr.com) or on iTunes, and registered for the time slots they need to pick up commuters, if they are a driver, or need to be picked up. "It is critical that people register with the app, so we can guarantee the pick-up time," says Mooradian.

A glitch happened the first week when they had difficulty matching drivers and passengers every 10 minutes. So to remedy this Commutr is now only taking a few drivers at a time and adding paid drivers to pick up passengers. "We have a waiting list of drivers," explains Mooradian. "As the number of people (using the service) grows, we'll retire the black cars (paid drivers who can wait as needed) and add more commuters."

Commutr is a full-time business for Mooradian and his partners Sorin Neacsu, the CTO, Zach Burghardt, the designer, software engineer Ovi Roatis and Mooradian's brother-in-law, John Slack. "I had been using the casual carpool in Orinda for two years and in the back of my mind I kept thinking there must be a better way of doing this with the help of technology," says Mooradian.

The New Yorker moved to the Bay Area eight years ago and became

an entrepreneur. He has already started and sold two businesses and after the last one, Ready Force, was acquired by Looksharp, he decided to tackle the Lamorinda commute with former Ready Force colleagues.

"We have many requests to expand the service," says the young Moraga dad. They are considering adding a pick-up site in Moraga, another one in Orinda, one in Lafayette, Walnut Creek or Berkeley, as well as a drop-off in Oakland. They are also looking at expanding hours to 8:30 a.m. – the current window is from 7 to 8 a.m. The first two San Francisco drop-off locations are at the corner of Fremont and Howard streets, or the corner of Front and Pine streets.

The cost for the service is \$3 a day. "It costs much less than BART parking plus the ticket," says Mooradian. Of the total cost, \$2 per person goes to the driver, and \$1 to Commutr. "People have told us that we should charge more because they want us to stay in business," Mooradian adds with a big smile.

"After a while there won't need to be anybody here to make sure that people are getting into the right cars," adds Mooradian. "People will log in their times in the app, their pick-up and drop-off spots, and the program will create the groups in 10 minute intervals." The app is available on the company's website at www.getcommutr.com.

Pigeon Deaths in Lamorinda Linked to Avian Parasite

By Cathy Dausman

Like a scene from a Hitchcock movie, birds are dying in Lamorinda. At least one flock of approximately 30 band-tailed pigeons in Orinda has already been devastated, says Dr. Guthrum Purdin of Lindsay Wildlife Museum in Walnut Creek. "These birds look sick," he said. "It's upsetting for people to see."

The California native bird with an already low reproduction rate – single births happen only two or three times a year – is experiencing an outbreak of Trichomonosis, a disease caused by a single-celled

microscopic protozoan parasite, Trichomonas gallinae.

"It was driving me crazy," said Orinda resident Leeann Brady, who wondered if the deaths of the pigeons were caused by poisoning.

"It's definitely in the Orinda and Lafayette area," agreed Krysta Rogers of the California Department of Fish and Wildlife. Rogers is an environmental scientist and avian specialist who visited the affected area Jan. 16. She says the band-tailed pigeons are typically found in higher eleva-

tions in oak woods and conifer forests. They feed on acorns, eating them whole. The disease causes lesions near the mouth restricting their ability to feed and they die of starvation or suffocation.

The disease spreads readily when birds flock during winter months and generally dissipates as the pigeons pair off during mating season. Rogers said the disease Trichomonas gallinae is strictly an avian parasite and will not spread to humans or mammals. ... continued on page B4



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