

SOUTHERN CALIFORNIA: Gas price hike has drivers worried



DAVID BAUMAN/STAFF PHOTOGRAPHER

From left, Craig Deming and his son Jonathan, of Riverside, fill up the family car at a Chevron station in Riverside. Craig Deming said he usually pays more attention to the brand of gasoline he buys than searching for the least expensive price, but he said the rising gas prices are making him take notice.

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Published: 17 February 2012 04:46

PM

It's beginning to feel a lot like springtime 2008 around Southern California.

Warmer weather. Check.

Presidential election heating up. Check

\$4 gasoline prices. Check, unfortunately.

After a winter of slight increases, the average cost of a gallon of regular unleaded gas in the Riverside-Sa Bernardino region leapt 16 cents in eight days — and a nickel overnight — to \$3.95 on Friday. Barring an unexpected decline, many drivers said they expect gas to hit \$4 on average by Monday.

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"This couldn't happen at a worse time," said Carol Miller, 56, of Jurupa Valley. "There's really not a good time for it. The economy is just getting back on its feet."

The increase came early this year, said Jeffrey Spring, spokesman for the Automobile Club of Southern California.

"We typically see them more often in March and April," Spring said in a news release. "Unfortunately, even without this large increase, prices were already at record levels for February."

A summer of sky-high pump prices four years ago sent the economy further into a tailspin and forced many drivers to park their cars in favor of public transit, or make other changes to curb their gas use. Some drivers were already planning to make those adjustments again this year.

"What is there to do about it," said Craig Deming, 47, a lifelong resident of Riverside. "We do what we can do down on trips."

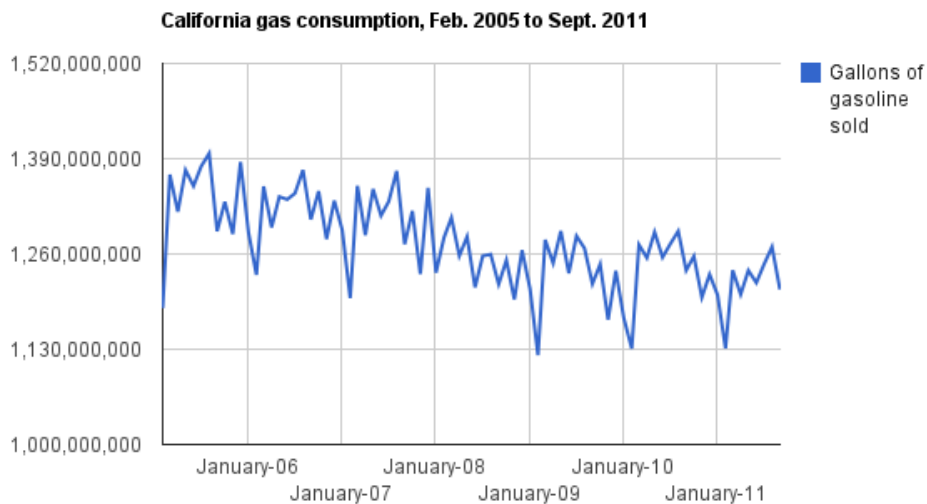
Filling the tank of his small SUV on Friday before heading for a camping weekend, Deming said he rarely paid attention to the price at the pump, choosing the station brand over the cost. But he acknowledges the costs are going up. As a result, he said he and his family walk when they can.

"We'll walk to Fairmount Park, or to the store," Deming said. "We get around."

OUTLOOK UNCERTAIN

Oil industry analysts are divided on whether 2012 will be a year of record gas price leaps. Since 2008, so-called speculators, notably former Shell Oil CEO John Hofmeister, have predicted \$5 a barrel of gas was coming.

Others, such as Tom Kloza with the Oil Price Information Service, which tracks industry trends and retail prices, have remained more optimistic.



“You may indeed have to pay \$5 (per gallon) if you buy your summer gasoline on a tropical island, Martha’s Vineyard, or one of the tonier suburbs of New York, San Francisco, or Los Angeles,” Kloza wrote Friday on his blog. “But the chances of nationwide gasoline averages approaching \$5 a gallon are about as good as having the Spice Girls perform a tribute to Demi Moore at the Oscars.”

Kloza said 2008 prices swung so widely it is difficult to draw conclusions. Southern California typically pays 45 cents more for gas than the national average. Based on that, Kloza’s expected national average of \$3.40 would set Riverside-area prices around \$4.70, under a worst-case scenario.

Higher-priced gas — even not record-breaking prices — is already changing the buying habits of local drivers.

“A lot of people held off buying a car for the last three years,” said Sarah Catz, a researcher at the UC Irvine Institute of Transportation Studies. “And now they can buy electric vehicles.”

More automakers, including Toyota and Mitsubishi, are offering plug-in electric vehicles for sale in 2012. They will join Chevy and Nissan in offering electric cars for residential sale at local dealerships.

Public transit providers in the area are also luring people out of their cars. Four years ago, when gas prices spiked, Riverside Transit Agency and Omnitrans in San Bernardino County reported record ridership. Since then, both have added a handful of commuter bus offerings to and from Metrolink stations, and in San Bernardino officials are planning to have the region’s first rapid transit line, set to open in about two years.

But in those four years, transit funding has decreased, Catz said, and some underperforming bus routes have been reduced or eliminated to streamline service. Those losses hurt transportation options, she said.

“I would venture to say there has not been an increase in bus service anywhere in Southern California,” Catz said.

