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## Government initiative rewards alternate transportation benefits

By Karen Lee

**I**t seems almost laughable to call it “rush hour” these days — when “rush hour” now lasts nearly three hours each way.

According to the Texas Transportation Institute’s annual Urban Mobility Study, daily rush hour in 1999, the most recent year available, is now almost six hours per day in the nation’s major cities. The average person is delayed 36 hours per year, and traffic congestion is costing the country \$78 billion for 4.5 billion hours of extra travel time and 6.8 billion gallons of fuel wasted while sitting in traffic.

Over the past decade, a number of employers, encouraged by local governments concerned about the growing air pollution and highway clogging, have begun offering workers incentives to take public transit, join car- or vanpools, walk, ride their bicycles — anything but driving alone.

Now the federal government is trying to turn these commuter benefits into a rite of passage.

The U.S. Environmental Protection Agency and the U.S. Department of Transportation have established the Commuter Choice Leadership Initiative, which offers a voluntary National Standard of

Excellence for employer-provided commuter benefits. Attaining such a standard brings the employer benefits of their own, not the least of which are technical assistance in implementing commuter benefits, forums in which employers can exchange ideas and public recognition.

“These smart choices businesses make every day add up to reduced traffic congestion and reduced air pollution,” says Margo Oge, director of the EPA’s Office of Transportation and Air Quality. These benefit programs, she continues, “make our cities more livable places to walk, to work in and to raise our families.”

### Costs minimized

So far some 40 employers, ranging from five covered employees to 19,000, have enrolled in the initiative, with most having offered commuter benefit programs for several years previously. To qualify, they must make available to employees at least one “primary” benefit and at least three “secondary” benefits chosen from lists drawn up by the government. They must also show that a minimum portion of workers participate in the programs.

Federal officials explain that primary benefits, which include tax-free transit passes and vanpool benefits, telecommuting arrangements and parking cash-outs, have been proven to significantly reduce traffic and air pollution. While the secondary benefits, such as shuttles to and from transit stations, reduced-cost parking for carpools, bike facilities and onsite convenience stores, do not have the same effects as primary benefits, they do help reduce traffic.

Of course, many employers do not offer these programs strictly for help or recognition, although, says Brian Shaw, Emory University’s director of alternate transportation, “we can put on the job announcements that we’re a Commuter Leadership employer and it’s like saying we’re an equal opportunity employer.”

Atlanta, where Emory is located, places in the Texas Transportation Institute’s top five most congested cities in the U.S. Even before the city reached that level of gridlock, Emory staff members could see the university was not going to be able to meet its parking demands, even if new parking decks were constructed.

“It costs \$10,000 a space to

build a new parking deck,” Shaw says. “That’s an expensive proposition. If we don’t have to build a 1,500-space parking deck at \$10,000 a space, that saves us a lot of money.”

Under its decade-old alternate transportation program, Emory does not have to build that deck, at least not for a while. Besides offering its staff free passes on the city’s subway system, the university runs a carpool and vanpool program, complete with discounted and reserved parking, and provides buses, shuttles, bicycle racks, guaranteed rides home and shower facilities. A full-scale master planning effort over the past several years has led to the closing of much of the campus to vehicles, making it more pedestrian friendly.

Besides making good financial sense, offering a slate of commuter benefits is “certainly something people appreciate,” Shaw notes. “For some of our lower-paid people ... the transportation costs are mitigated, and that makes Emory a more attractive place to work.”

### Good business sense

Mitch Saruwatari, California division transportation systems manager for Kaiser Permanente, also believes commuter benefits make a company more attractive to prospective employees, although not necessarily for the same reasons.

“I think consumers out there are much more sophisticated, particularly Gen X-ers,” Saruwatari explains.

“They look for companies that are environmentally friendly.”

Kaiser Permanente offers a wide range of benefits, including preferential parking for carpools, guaranteed rides home, carpool matches, quarterly and monthly drawings based on mode of transport and bike-to-work days.

Surprisingly, Kaiser does not see big savings, Saruwatari says. The company is able to run its program in part because of the tax savings the benefits provide. But anecdotal evidence indicates that the benefits are an added bonus for new hires.

“We have a lot of commuters, and having an employer that supports commuter programs that allow them to get to work is attractive,” Saruwatari comments. “Our biggest enrollment comes after the new employee orientation program, which says to me they were already thinking about it when they came on.”

Indeed, Linda Ballew, Walt Disney Corp.’s manager of corporate commuter transportation, claims that while alternate transportation benefits do not play a key role in recruitment and retention, they are important to the conversations HR personnel have with those people who relocate to work for the company.

“It’s a convenience for our cast members,” Ballew says. “People want to work here, so they commute farther.”

Although Disney has had carpool programs in place since the 1970s, it

has only been in the past several years that the commuter benefit slate has expanded to include carpool and vanpool subsidies and company-sponsored vans for use by the employees at discounted rates. More than 10,000 of Disney’s southern California-based employees take advantage of the program; many of them are paid \$1 for every day they report participation.

Disney does reap environmental benefits from their commuter plan. Some are mandated by Southern California’s air quality management districts, established to fight the region’s longtime gridlock and resulting smog. But Ballew, who works in Disney’s environmental policy department, explains the company has wanted to “do the right thing when it comes to the environment.”

The right thing also makes better business sense. The reduction of parking needs at its Disneyland Resort allowed the designers of a new administration building to eliminate construction of one level of parking spaces, resulting in savings of \$2 million. Moreover, commuter benefits have made it easier for Disney to handle requirements for transportation demand management for new development.

“Here in Southern California, it works,” Ballew says. “The number of people participating on a daily basis has gone up. It’s not dramatic, it doesn’t happen overnight. It’s a step in the right direction that keeps snowballing.” — *K.L.*

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**Commuter Choice Leadership Initiative**



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