

# Commuter Choice Initiative Geared To Employers

By Anne Bond Emrich

GRAND RAPIDS — More than 225 employers from 22 states representing some 575,000 employees now offer their employees commuter benefits under the Commuter Choice Leadership Initiative, a business-government partnership sponsored jointly by the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) and the U.S. Department of Transportation (DOT).

The agencies officially launched the program last August and see it as a way to help employers address the issue of limited or expensive parking and improve employee recruiting and retention.

By expanding their employee benefit packages to include commuter options, participating employers also address environmental, energy and safety concerns associated with increased numbers of vehicles on the road, the agencies say.

The Interurban Transit Partnership (ITP) signed on with the program late last summer and is the only Grand Rapids employer to do so thus far.

According to the EPA, if just half of all U.S. employees were covered under commuter benefits, traffic and air pollution could be cut by the equivalent of taking 15 million cars off the road each year, which, in turn, would save American workers about \$12 billion in fuel costs.

Here are just a few of the facts the EPA

and DOT underscore in making their case:

- The number of cars in the U.S. is increasing twice as fast as the population.

- A typical U.S. household spends nearly 20 percent of its income on driving costs.

- The typical American worker spends about 160 hours and \$1,800 per year traveling to and from work.

- Three-quarters of all trips made to and from work in the U.S. are made by commuters driving alone.

- Americans spent \$60 billion on gas traveling to and from work in 2001.

- A company with 1,000 employees, by offering commuter benefits, can take 175 cars off the road each year, lower its parking expenses by more than \$70,000 annually and save its employees the cost of nearly 44,000 gallons of gas.

Of ITP's 280 employees, 45 percent working at ITP offices in the People's Building and 15 to 20 percent of those working at headquarters on Wealthy Street are using alternative means of transportation, said Mary Ann Young, business transportation services coordinator.

"Everyone here is comfortable with the bus because that's what we do," Young pointed out. Some employees take the bus, while others ride a bike, walk or get dropped off by someone else, she said.

Employees have unlimited transit passes as part of their benefit package, but ITP

also offers carpool matching, vanpooling programs, bike lockers, shower facilities, and on-site fleet cars for employees who do not drive to work but may need a car for business purposes during work hours.

"First of all it's a cost savings for the employee because they're not operating their own vehicle," Young said. "There's also the camaraderie issue. If you're commuting a long ways, it just makes it a more pleasurable ride.

"Second of all, it saves us money on parking because we need to supply less of it."

Young noted that ITP's carpool matching and vanpool programs are available to any area employer. Under the just launched vanpooling program, companies can lease minivans for carpooling for \$700 a month, which includes all maintenance, fuel and servicing costs associated with owning a car.

Stephen Offutt, who manages the Commuter Choice program for the EPA, said the initiative is modeled after the EPA's Energy Star (formerly Green Lights) program. He said the agency has been using various third party transit and transportation planning organizations and associations to get the word out to employers.

The program is more popular on the West Coast, with the states of California and Washington leading the pack.

A large percentage of all employers in

the two states are signed up, Offutt noted. Some California counties have a regional law, and Washington has a state law, requiring employers above a certain size to make commute options available to employees.

The interest in transportation options is high in those states, he said, because everyone is fully aware of the population, air quality and traffic problems.

"Employers, too, see themselves as part of the problem and part of the solution," he observed. "I think in other parts of the country where the issues aren't nearly as critical, it's lower down on the radar screen for many employers."

The IRS allows an employer to provide a transit benefit up to \$100 per month per employee, tax free, Offutt noted.

To qualify for the Commuter Choice program, an employer must offer one primary benefit, such as tax-free transit, vanpool passes, telecommuting or the ability to trade free parking for its cash equivalent. Most companies offer secondary benefits like transit station shuttles, ridesharing, or reduced cost parking for carpools and vanpools.

Participating companies earn the designation "Commuter Choice Employer," thus getting recognition as environmentally and employee-friendly organizations, Offutt said.

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