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EPA picks Bay Area for commuter experiment

By Sean Holstege

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Federal environmental regulators want Bay Area commuters to stop driving to work alone, and those employers that help make it easier will get the government's official stamp of excellence. The Bay Area is a test bed for a national experiment by the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency aimed at reducing smog by promoting alternatives to solo commuting.

The experiment is called the Commuter Choice Leadership Initiative and is run by the EPA's Robin Snyder, who was in the area last week to sell the idea.

Under the initiative, employers agree to pay workers at least \$32.50 a month to take mass transit or van pools to work, "buy-out" a parking space or offer telecommuting. They must also have a commute coordinator and offer three lesser benefits ranging from pre-tax transit credits to bicycle lockers.

Employers must also provide a guaranteed ride home for transit commuters who get stuck at work.

In return, the EPA will, as it did last week, tout the company or public agency as one of the "Bay Area's Best Workplaces for Commuters." On the list: Applied Biosystems of Foster City, Orthopedic Systems Inc. of Union City and Hacienda Business Park Owners Association in Pleasanton. Another is

Bayer Corp. near Berkeley's Aquatic Park, which employs nearly 1,400 people. The company's commute coordinator Mark Collins said Bayer offers "a program for every way to get to work from home."

About 140 employees have joined car pools, another 30 pay about \$100 a month to join a shared van and 25 people bike to Bayer, because it provides lockers and showers. Bayer also runs a shuttle to Ashby BART Station and cuts a \$45 check every month to 220 people who take transit. Perhaps the most progressive idea: Bayer buys walking shoes and umbrellas for employees who walk to work. Some companies offer employees vacation time for the time they spend on trains and buses getting to work.

It's not pure altruism. Snyder says everybody wins by participating in the voluntary program. Companies save money and in an April 2001 survey, 86 percent of American workers said commuter assistance is an important benefit.

Like day care facilities, health club discounts and 401(k) plans, it can be a popular fringe benefit that may make the difference for some job seekers.

"We offer a way for a company to distinguish itself from other employers," Snyder said.

The Commuter Choice Leadership Initiative runs a Web site where employ-

ers can calculate the dollars-and-cents benefits. Fill in the blanks about employees, salaries and commuter benefits and the computer spits back the bottom line.

For instance, a hypothetical California company - XYZ Inc. - pays 100 employees an average of \$30,000 to work in a suburban office park. XYZ lets five people telecommute full time, provides a rack for 10 bikes and offers \$30 a month in pre-tax transit subsidies.

The EPA figures that XYZ Inc. will spend \$13,400 a year but save \$43,000 annually in productivity and recruitment. Employees will save \$18,600 a year and drive 82,000 fewer miles. Consequently, the 3,500 fewer pounds of carbon monoxide and 45 tons of carbon monoxide will spew into the air.

Why is the EPA starting in the Bay Area?

Snyder cites progressive employers, an established mass transit culture and plenty of transit options, plus troubling freeway congestion and air quality trends. A pending clean air lawsuit against the EPA is no small point.

Ultimately, Snyder said he hopes that half the employers in the country will participate, taking 15 million cars off the roads.

Sean Holstege is a writer for the Alameda Newspaper Group.