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'Dirty' solo commuters get the eye

By BRUCE SICELOFF, Staff Writer

Driving alone to work in the morning can give us each a breath of independence -- and it can jam us all into a cloud of exhaust.

Can we ever give this up? A clean-air campaign to be rolled out in the Triangle next year will target solo commuting as a foul, costly habit -- and one we can rein in, with tough-love help from our bosses.

Coaxing workers out of their cars will be a challenge in the sprawling Triangle. Cheap parking is widely regarded as a workplace entitlement, and public transit options are spotty. In Wake County, the portion of workers who commute alone in cars rose above 81 percent during the 1990s.



Staff Photo by Harry Lynch

Above: Algie and Tammy Walker and their daughter Alexis, 5, wait for the bus on Campus Drive in Durham. Algie is going to work; his wife and daughter are going shopping.

A few employers are changing direction. They are helping workers cut back their driving with incentives such as monthly bus and van-pool subsidies of \$30 to \$100, showers for cyclists and preferred parking for carpoolers.

More employers will be encouraged to follow suit starting next year. The General Assembly called in 1999 for action to reduce a major tailpipe pollutant and to slow the growth rate of all vehicle traffic. A local plan incorporating a national "Best Workplaces for Commuters" initiative will promote the economic, social and environmental merits of commuter benefits.

Durham County now requires large employers to survey workers' transportation needs and to develop plans for reducing commuter trips. The ordinance spurred Blue Cross and Blue Shield of North Carolina to extend flex-time and telecommuting options to more workers.

Other Triangle employers are paying attention to little things that shape daily decisions about whether to leave the car at home.

What if you had to leave work for a sick child in the middle of the day? GlaxoSmithKline, Durham County government and IBM promise an emergency ride home.

Want to run errands at lunchtime or on the way home? Employees of the National Institute of Environmental Health Sciences can find automated teller machines, shop for small items and get lunch where they work.

Cars are the chief culprits in North Carolina's air quality problems. The 1999 legislation focused on nitrogen oxide emissions, which contribute to acid rain and ozone pollution. A plan to meet legislative targets by 2009, drafted by a gubernatorial advisory panel, is due early next year.

In the first phase of a statewide approach, the Triangle J Council of Governments, a seven-county policy and services agency, will build a regional Best Workplaces for Commuters program using standards refined by the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency.

They picked a good place to start.

Wake County is one of the nation's 20 dirtiest counties in terms of respiratory health risks from pollutants including ozone, according to rankings compiled at www.scorecard.com by the private Environmental Defense Fund.

Wake ranked among the worst 10 percent of all U.S. counties for emissions of carbon monoxide, nitrogen oxides, fine airborne particles and volatile organic compounds.

When commuters wonder why they should change their driving habits, David D. King, deputy state transportation secretary, wants them to think about ozone alerts and "stay indoors" warnings that restrict life in the Triangle and as far away as the Great Smoky Mountains National Park.

"A place that is one of the great treasures of our state, and we can't go there some days because we can't get a handle on air quality," King said. "How can you not agree to do some things that really aren't all that painful to try to make a dent in that problem?"

Bus riders' blues

The Millennium Hotel in northwest Durham is making a dent by making the most of limited city bus service. About one-third of the hotel's 150 workers walk, take the bus or carpool to work.

COMMUTER-FRIENDLY

Eight Triangle employers are among more than 600 businesses and agencies that have been recognized nationwide as Best Workplaces for Commuters.

The voluntary program encourages employers to help workers reduce air pollution and traffic congestion by switching from solo automobiles to mass transit, carpools and other means of getting to work. It is a public-private partnership created by the U.S. Department of Transportation and the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency.

A Best Workplace for Commuters must show each year that:

* At least 14 percent of its employees are not driving alone to work or it will meet that target within 18 months.

* It offers at least one primary commuter benefit, which can include incentives such as substantial transit/vanpool subsidies, cash in lieu of free parking, or telecommuting that reduces at least 6 percent of commute trips.

* At least three supporting commuter benefits are available (one benefit for employers with fewer than 20 workers). Examples include ride-sharing services, lockers and showers for cyclists, incentives for living near work, preferred parking for car poolers, and on-site amenities such as child care or dry cleaning.

* Employees are guaranteed emergency rides home.

* Commuter benefits are actively promoted to employees.

The national program includes a few thousand small employers grouped together in business parks, shopping malls and towns as Best Workplace for Commuters Districts. The employers and districts have a combined 1.2 million employees.

"It's not a feel-good program that pats employers on the back for doing something," said Robin Snyder of the EPA. "It actually requires that they get results."

The eight Triangle employers are Cisco Systems Inc.; Durham County government; GlaxoSmithKline; National Institute of Environmental Health Sciences; Research Triangle Foundation; Triangle Transit Authority; University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill; U.S. Environmental Protection Agency. (Bruce Sicheloff)

A bus stop at its entrance helps make the Millennium a magnet for job candidates who don't have cars. But hotel workers who rely on the bus say they understand why there aren't more commuters riding with them every day.

James F. Leake takes the No. 10 bus downtown, transfers to the No. 6 bus and arrives at the hotel about 90 minutes after leaving his apartment in central Durham. If he had a car, he said, the drive would take less than 10 minutes.

He wishes DATA, the Durham bus agency, allowed transfers at all stops, not just its central terminal, and that buses ran later and more than once per hour at night. Sometimes the Millennium's airport shuttle fills in the gaps in DATA service.

"I can call the hotel, and they make arrangements to get me to work if I'm scheduled to be here on Christmas," Leake said.

Denise Floyd, the Millennium's human resources director, said a discount meal program in the hotel restaurant makes it easier for employees to stay there through lunch. The hotel helps employees find rides and tries not to split car poolers' work shifts.

Some technology-based employers have the same idea.

Cisco Systems pays for employees' broadband Internet access and gives them telephone and computer gear that makes working at home like working at the office. About 11 percent of Cisco's 2,500 Triangle workers telecommute at least once a week.

Barry V. Fussell, 43, a Cisco programmer and project leader, sits out the morning rush at his home near Clayton. He begins the workday at home, putting in an hour or two at his laptop.

The 37-mile drive to Cisco's campus in Research Triangle Park can take 90 minutes at peak drive time. Later in the morning, Fussell can make the trip in 45 minutes.

"If I'm at home working instead of driving, that benefits me and Cisco," Fussell said. "We get more work done that way."

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