

CONNECTICUT POST

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42 PAGES • 50 CENTS

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TUESDAY, MAY 25, 2004

52¢ in retail outlets

SECTION D

Feds list top spots for travel to work

By Pam Dawkins
Staff Writer

A relatively new partnership between the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency and the federal Department of Transportation today announced its list of Best Workplaces for Commuters in the Greater New York City area, home of one of the most frustrating and time-consuming commutes in the nation.

The regional list recognized 63 companies in the area, which includes part of New Jersey and Fairfield County, Conn.

“This is the longest commute of any large city, said partnership manager Connie Ruth of the Interstate 95 corridor into New York City.

According to the EPA, commuters in Greater New York City average 80 minutes each day getting to and from work. And, as the 2000 Census reported, more people in that area drive to work alone than take mass transit, said Ruth.

But encouraging ride-sharing, the use of mass transit and other options such as telecommuting are good for everyone, Ruth said.

Denis Fortin, owner and president of Preferred Tool & Die in Shelton, said funding a van to bring about 14 or 15 workers from Norwalk each day costs him about \$20,000 a year.

That expenditure helped place his company on the list, which also includes Bridgeport-based People’s Bank, SACIA, the business council of Southwestern Connecticut, PanAmSat Corp. in Wilton and Purdue Pharma L.P. and Pitney Bowes, both of Stamford.

Fortin, who employs about 70 permanent and temporary workers, said he instituted the van pool “just so we could have the help we wanted here at a given time. Those workers don’t have their own transportation and probably wouldn’t be able to make the commute otherwise. “It helps us keep a stable work force, said Fortin.

Approximately 300 of People’s Bank’s work force of nearly 3,000 take advantage of the bank’s offerings, said spokesman Brent DiGiorgio.

For example, employees receive up to \$65 each month to defray the costs of train or bus commuting. And members of the “Commuters Club receive between \$1 and \$1.75 each day they carpool, whether they are a driver or a passenger.

Not surprisingly, Stamford-based MetroPool Inc., which helps employers figure out how and what incentives to offer employees, also made the list.

According to spokeswoman Peggy Hetherington, a number of other companies offer incentives to commuters. The EPA, she said, tends to recognize businesses that make direct contributions, such as MetroPool’s \$100 per month subsidy of mass transit expenses.

There’s been a shift recently, said Hetherington, as more Fairfield County executives started accepting congestion as a big issue for their businesses.

The Connecticut Department of Transportation offers free help, through MetroPool, in implementing commuting programs. The state also offers tax credits to some Fairfield County employers that implement some sort of commuting program.

Commuting can also help an employee’s bottom line.

Joe McGee, vice president of public policy for SACIA and a member of MetroNorth’s Commuter Council, pays \$6 a month for his train travel between Fairfield and Stamford; SACIA picks up the rest of the bill.

Not only is the train commute faster than using a car, but McGee said the walk to the train station from his home and then to the office in Stamford is good exercise.

“I’ll arrange my schedule so I don’t need a car or so I have access to one, he said.

For most people, the lack of parking at train stations is the biggest barrier, said McGee. But he thinks the addition of parking spots and the number of free park-and-ride lots - along with growing congestion - will encourage more commuters.

“It’s really a mindset, he said.