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EPA lauds local business efforts to ease traffic

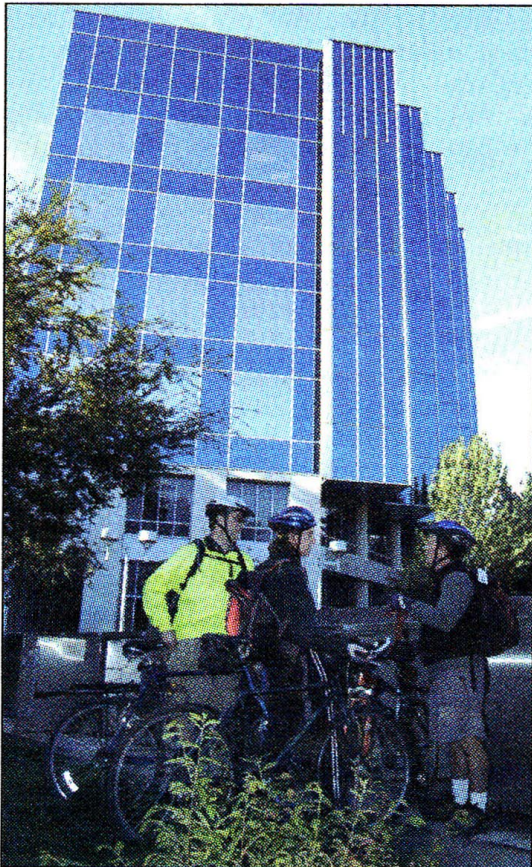
By Celia Lamb

Staff writer

When time permits, Jim Hartley likes to take the bus to work, and his employer is making it easier. He's more productive than when he's in a car, said Hartley, vice president of the environmental consulting firm CH2M Hill. By the time he gets to the office he has had time to read, make business calls on his cell phone and answer e-mails.

"Not everyone is going to take the bus or light rail to work," he said. "Not everyone can."

But he believes employees of CH2M Hill who can take public transit should be nudged to do so. So his company pays for bus passes for employees who work in the company's Natomas office.



DENNIS McCOY / SACRAMENTO BUSINESS JOURNAL

From left, CH2M Hill's Thomas Jacques, Genevieve Villemaire and Steven Long bike to work

CH2M Hill is one of 46 Greater Sacramento employers on the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency's new "Best Workplaces for Commuters" list. Companies on the list must offer financial incentives significant enough to get 14 percent of their employees out of the car, or at least into car-pools.

"This is a national standard of excellence," said Robin Snyder, the EPA's team manager for the commuter program. "These employers are the top tier nationally. They're making real, measurable contributions to improving air quality and reducing congestion."

The EPA developed its first "Best Workplaces" list in the Bay Area last year, and has since completed lists in Washington, D.C., Houston and Tucson, Ariz. By recognizing these employers, the EPA hopes to cut down on the number of cars on the road and improve air quality.

Sacramento was an obvious next choice because of its proximity to the Bay Area and because the region is in violation of federal Clean Air Act standards for ozone. It's also one of the more difficult commuting markets in the country.

More than 800,000 people commute each day in the Sacramento region, according to the U.S. Census, and 75 percent of them drive to work alone. A 2000 transportation model used by the Sacramento Area Council of Governments concluded that the average

Sacramento commuter drives 22.9 miles per day and spends 15 percent of that drive time on highly congested roads.

And a recent study by Demographics Monthly, a research service of the Sacramento Business Journal's parent

company, American City Business Journals, concluded that Sacramento-area drivers have a longer commute than drivers in 678 other metropolitan areas in the country. The study included in the Sacramento metropolitan area Truckee, Grass Valley and Douglas County, Nev., across the Sierra from Alpine County.

Stockton and the Bay Area rated even worse in the ACBJ study.

Employers have 18 months from the time their name appears on the list to survey the commuting habits of their employees to make sure they're meeting the goal of having 14 percent of their employees commute by means other than driving alone.

To get on the list they have to offer at least four kinds of commuter benefits from a list of options. Benefits can include deep discounts on parking costs for car-poolers, telecommuting options and prize drawings for employees that use alternative commuting methods.

A full list of the feted 46 can be found at: www.commuterchoice.gov/campaign/sacbest.htm.

CH2M Hill scored points for providing car-pool spaces, bike lockers, locker rooms with showers in the company's building and \$300 bike subsidies. About 46 of the 246 employees in the Natomas office have free bus passes. Intel Corp.'s benefits included providing fitness centers, basketball and volleyball courts, and aerobics and karate classes, ostensibly because employees don't have to drive to get to a health club. And the state Franchise Tax Board offers employees 60 percent discounts on new bikes and \$25 gas cards for people who car-pool.

The EPA has offered a similar program to recognize employers who promote alternative commuting since 2001. Employers who participated have experienced an average of 15 percent to 20 percent of their employees changing their commuting methods, Snyder said.

Sacramento had about 20 employers in the old program. The Sacramento Transportation Management Association and the South Natomas Transportation Management Association help many of those companies by pooling money to buy discounted transit benefits, bicycle vouchers and other commuter benefits.

Snyder pitches the "Best Workplaces" program as an incentive for recruiting and retaining employees.

"When you look at these employee benefits relative to the costs of a straight pay raise, employers save money," she said. And employees don't have to pay income taxes on things like van-pool vouchers.

Having their names on a list can also provide public relations benefits for companies.

"CH2M Hill is able to use this as part of our corporate branding strategy," Hartley said. "It's important to us to work deliberately to reduce our ecological footprint."

Besides, he adds, walking home from the bus provides "a lot more exercise than you get pushing a gas pedal."

() A version of this story appeared in the Oct. 24 print edition of the Business Journal.*