

At Work

New program boosts commuter choices

By David Goll

In West Berkeley, parking has been at a premium ever since the formerly industrial area - filled with old, red-brick buildings tailor made for retrofitting, remodeling and gentrifying - became a trendy place for manufacturers, software companies, advertising agencies and marketing firms to locate their businesses.

"Finding a place to park is a real challenge for people who work in this area," said Mark Collins, employee transportation coordinator at Bayer Corp.'s biotech and biopharmaceutical manufacturing, research and office facility on Dwight Way, near Sixth Street.

"Personally, I have an easier time finding parking in San Francisco."

But the pharmaceutical firm has found a cure for its headache.

To ease the commuting and parking travails of its 1,400 employees, the Berkeley location of Germany-based Bayer AG has joined Bay Area Best Workplaces for Commuters, a program begun last year by a coalition of business, environmental, human resource and transportation organizations.

Sponsors of the program include the Bay Area Air Quality Management District, Bay Area Council, the Metropolitan Transportation Commission and the federal Environmental Protection Agency, among others. They claim that in 2002, they helped persuade 150,000 employees at 80 companies around the Bay Area to try alternate commute modes either regularly or periodically.

"By offering commuter benefits, a company with 1,000 employees can lower its parking expenses by more than \$70,000 and save employees \$13,000 in taxes and \$160,000 in gas, parking and vehicle costs each year," said Robin Snyder, EPA program manager for the Bay Area.

The program puts out a list of best workplaces for commuters. Last year's standouts included Aetna US Healthcare in San Ramon, Sun Microsystems Inc. in Newark, Mervyn's headquarters in Hayward, Kaiser-Permanente/Northern California in Oakland, PeopleSoft Inc. in Pleasanton, SBC Communications Inc. in San Ramon and the cities of Lafayette, San Ramon and Pleasanton. New candidates are being sought for this year's list.

"The list is a chance to recognize employers who have shown their commitment to alleviating these problems, saving their employees time and money, while reducing the congestion and pollution caused by so many cars on the road," said the EPA's Snyder.

Bayer has taken its parking pill seriously. According to Collins, the company, in the past year, has expanded its alternatives to solo driving, offering vanpools, carpools, bicycling, the Commuter Check program that reimburses employees up to \$45 a month for using public transportation - and even a program to encourage walking to work by offering gift certificates for walking shoes, umbrellas and other items to ease a commute on foot.

"The company subsidizes the vanpools and people who take carpools have their own parking lot once they arrive at work," Collins said. "That's pretty valuable around here. People can be productive on their way to work and more productive while they're here."

San Ramon's Bishop Ranch is another alternate commuter beachhead. Marci McGuire, program manager of the Bishop Ranch Transportation Centre, says ridership on the park's express bus service to the Walnut Creek and Dublin-Pleasanton BART stations increased by 20 percent last year, and it has grown again by about 15 percent so far in 2003. The service is free to employees who work at Bishop Ranch.

"Participation has been spectacular," she said. "Employers and employees both have embraced it. Companies are doing a great job of promoting it."

McGuire said the commute vanpools that operate in and out of Bishop Ranch, where nearly 30,000 people work, are also going strong. The vans are usually driven by employees themselves, who in turn ferry groups of 10 to 15 co-workers who live in far-flung cities to and from their workplace.

"It's great to have a program like the Bay Area's Best Workplaces to support commuters and offer recognition for what we do," McGuire said.

Bishop Ranch conducts a survey of its workers' commute habits every other year. McGuire said she'll be very curious to see the results of the survey scheduled for October. In fall 2001, the park's rate of solo car commuters was 69.4 percent - considered excellent in auto-oriented suburban areas like San Ramon.

"I think we might have an even better rate this year," she said. The program just signed up 50 new express bus riders last week at ADP Inc., which moved its offices from elsewhere in San Ramon to Bishop Ranch this year.

"Having the support of a program like the Bay Area's Best Workplaces helps us get people's attention," McGuire said. "And we need that help. Changing the habits and mindsets of people in how they commute to work is, well, a major challenge."

Employers have until Aug. 29 to enroll in this year's program, and can do so by going online at www.commuterchoice.gov.

At work explores challenges in the contemporary workplace. To comment or suggest stories, contact David Goll at dgoll@bizjournals.com or 925-598-1436.

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