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## THE CONGESTION CHALLENGE

# 2 honored for commuter efforts

### Pridemore, C-Tran official trying to get people on buses, bikes

By ERIK ROBINSON  
*Columbian staff writer*

PORTLAND — Two Clark County representatives are among almost 200 organizations nationwide to earn gold stars for helping to get people out of cars and into buses and onto bicycles.

Clark County commissioner Craig Pridemore and C-Tran ride share specialist Jan Bowers earned recognition as two of 174 charter members of the Commuter Choice Leadership Initiative, a public-private partnership designed to reduce highway congestion and air pollution.

The initiative, which began in May as part of the Bush administration's national energy plan, was recognized this week during the International Association for Commuter Transportation conference at the Hilton in downtown Portland.

Co-sponsored by the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency and Department of Transportation, the program has a set of standards for businesses and government agencies that offer commuter benefits such as bus passes, bicycle racks and carpool sign-ups.

Steve Offutt, program manager for the EPA, said the program comes with no money.

### COMMUTING FACTS AND FIGURES

- The number of vehicles in the United States is increasing twice as fast as the population growth.
- In the United States, three-quarters of all trips made to and from work are in vehicles operated by a lone driver.
- A typical household spends almost 20 percent of its income in driving costs — more than it spends on food.
- By offering commuter benefits, a company with 1,000 employees can lower its parking expenses by more than \$70,000 and save participating employees \$13,000 in taxes and \$180,000 in gasoline, parking and vehicle costs.
- With commuter benefits, a typical American employee can avoid driving 3,300 miles each year, greater than the distance between New York and Los Angeles.
- The American Lung Association reports that even low levels of ozone adversely affect almost one-third of the U.S. population.

Sources: U.S. Environmental Protection Agency, Texas Transportation Institute, American Lung Association, Metropolitan Transportation Commission.

Rather, the idea is to build name recognition in the program, encouraging more businesses to take part as a way of enticing prospective employees.

"We demonstrate to them that it makes business sense to provide commuter choice benefits," Offutt said.

The 194 companies to become members of the initiative so far — 20 enrolled since the charter members deadline of Aug. 1 — employ about 350,000 employees in 18 states. Margo Oge, director of the EPA's Office of Transportation and Air Quality, figures 80,000 cars have been taken off the road due to the program so far — amounting

to about 4,000 tons of air pollution and 200,000 tons of greenhouse gases annually.

She expects the program to expand.

"Next year, we'll cover millions of employees," Oge said.

In Vancouver and Portland, commuting has never been so congested.

According to the most recent annual study of commuting habits by the Texas Transportation Institute, motorists in the area spent an average of 34 hours a year in traffic delays — up from 18 hours in 1991, and ranking Portland-Vancouver 23rd among 68 urban areas analyzed across the nation.

Local air quality officials, meanwhile, attribute as much as 60 percent of the region's air pollutants to automobiles.

That's why C-Tran and Clark County officials said they are hoping to improve air quality while at the same time easing congestion on crowded thoroughfares. Already, 60,000 Clark County residents pack on to the two bridges crossing the Columbia River during rush hour each day to work in Oregon.

"The greatest capacity on our freeways is in the passenger seat," commissioner Pridemore said. "If every car going across the bridge had two people in it, we could go 20 years more before adding capacity. That is effective use of public resources."

In the case of C-Tran, spokeswoman Gail Spolar said the transit agency has been offering incentives for its employees to reduce the number of single-occupancy vehicles arriving at work for the past 10 years. C-Tran offers employees free passes on its buses, preferred parking for carpool drivers, bicycle racks and gift certificates to local businesses, all in an effort, Spolar said, "to walk the talk."

"It's been very important for us to encourage good commuting habits," she said.

*Columbian staff writer Erin Middlewood contributed to this report.*