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SECTION A

More employers adding transportation benefits

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Finding a better ride to work for employees is quickly becoming another benefit employers are using to recruit and retain workers.

When asked if she'd rather telecommute or use a van pool instead of driving on Interstate 287 to work in Morristown each day, commuter Barbara Gordon of Franklin, Somerset County, enthusiastically responded, "Absolutely."

"It would be nice not to deal with rush-hour traffic," she said. "It's a stressful 45 minutes."

Federal and state governments are trying to help commuters like Gordon and their employers by offering programs that provide tax benefits for alternatives to driving alone, such as van pooling, using mass transit, shuttles or telecommuting.

"It's becoming more popular to say one of the great

"There are more suburban employers who have interests in transportation because employees are making transportation an issue."

NOREEN CARDINALI,
New Jersey Department of
Transportation's Bureau of
Statewide Planning

things about your company is they're paying for your transportation to work," said Sarah Bluhm, legislative affairs associate for the New Jersey Business and Industry Association.

The programs range from paying part of the cost of a van pool to setting up a car pool, offering a pre-tax subsidy for a train or bus ride or allowing telecommuting, she said.

Increased traffic congestion is a key reason some employers are offering commuting options. Figures from the 2000 census show

that New Jerseyans have the second-longest commutes in the nation.

"There are more suburban employers who have interests in transportation, because employees are making transportation an issue," said Noreen Cardinali, section chief of the New Jersey Department of Transportation's Bureau of Statewide Planning.

Cardinali's bureau oversees the state's "Smart Moves for Business" programs, which offer state tax exemptions and tax credits to employers who provide workers such options as telecommuting or van pools. Smart Moves has 241 work sites signed up.

The federal government started a similar program in May called Commuter Choice, which offers federal pre-tax benefits to pay for commuting options. The program, which does not offer subsidies, has 80

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employers signed up nationwide and is just starting in New Jersey.

Commuter Choice, sponsored by the federal Environmental Protection Agency and Department of Transportation, is intended to reduce traffic congestion and air pollution.

"It can be a recruiting tool," said Steve Offutt, Commuter Choice program manager.

Employers participating in the federal program have to meet 5 goals in order to be designated as a Commuter Choice employer, which they can highlight in employment advertising.

The company has to offer tangible benefits, such as allowing workers to buy pre-tax transit passes, giving workers a cash payment for their parking space or telecommuting. They also have to provide a central place for employees to get information about commuting options. Car and van poolers have to be offered a guaranteed ride home, for those who work late or have a family emergency.

Under Commuter Choice, at least 14 percent of a company's employees have to get to work in some way other than driving alone. The company also must have an on-site coordinator of transportation alternatives.

"Commuter Choice is plugging a hole and is not duplicating what's being done in the state," Cardinali said.

Many New Jersey companies work with county Transportation Management Association to set up car pools and van pools, shuttles and the guaranteed ride home.

In Central Jersey, those organizations include Somerset County's RideWise, Hunterdon Area Rural Transit, Keep Middlesex Moving and TransOptions in Union and Morris counties.

"We see people getting fed up with sitting in traffic, and they'll make a choice, if they can," said Donna McDonough, RideWise marketing coordinator. "We have 27 van pools right now, carrying 237 passengers. A fair number are big companies like AT&T, Met Life and Baker and Taylor."

Companies have a financial reason for participating. In New Jersey an estimated \$4.9 billion in lost productivity and lateness stems from time spent by workers commuting.

"Real-world solutions are in there. It depends on the setting

Robins, executive director of Rutgers Transportation Policy Institute. "I have more faith in tax benefits and commuter shuttles. They work best in areas with transit alternatives."

In Central Jersey, Merck & Co. pays 50 percent of the fare for van poolers and for transit riders, up to a pre-tax maximum of \$65 a month, through Smart Moves.

Merck also offers telecommuting, flexible work hours and compressed work weeks at the company's Rahway, Whitehouse Station, Lebanon and Franklin, Somerset, sites.

Of all the options, telecommuting makes the most sense for commuters who travel from a suburban home to a suburban workplace, said Steve Carrellas, coordinator of the state Chapter of the National Motorists Association.

"If people want to van pool, they're already doing it," Carrellas said. "Telecommuting is the most promising, and it fits into today's work ethic and lifestyle."

Commuter Nola Cauley of Franklin said she couldn't use van or car pooling because, as a manager, her hours are too irregular. But she telecommutes when she can, which is the only option to what she calls a harrowing drive on I-287 to Piscataway.

"There is nothing like rolling out of bed, putting on jeans and starting to work," Cauley said. "Commuting takes it out of you. Everyone gets to work and complains for a few minutes that 'I almost got killed getting here.'"

How tough an employee's commute is could be the difference in a decision to stay in a job or take a new one, Carrellas said.

"Some companies will have to think about it and identify a service, or they'll lose people who are tired of commuting," Carrellas said.

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