

EPA Launches National Commuter Choice Program

Companies, State and Local Governments Recognized

Last week, the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) launched a "Commuter Choice Leadership Initiative." Under a Commuter Choice Leadership agreement, employers commit to working with the EPA to develop new commuting benefits and services for employees. This initiative is part of an effort to redefine the "comprehensive employee benefits package" to include commuting benefits alongside other standard employee benefits such as health plans and 401K.

According to the EPA, this is the first step in a national effort to provide employers across the country with the opportunity to partner with the EPA in providing new commuting choices and services to their employees.

Commuting options promoted through the Commuter Choice Leader Initiative include: parking cashout (allowing employees to trade their free parking space for cash), transit fare subsidies, telecommuting (and other types of telework), compressed work schedules, flexible work schedules, carpools, vanpools, bicycling to work, walking to work, environmentally-friendly vehicles, and others.

As a result of recent changes in the U.S. tax code, employees frequently enjoy a reduced tax burden when taking advantage of these commuting options. Likewise, U.S. employers enjoy a reduced tax burden when providing commuting benefits that encourage these commuting options.

EPA recognized the following companies as Commuter Choice Leaders: The Calvert Group, GEICO DIRECT, Intel, Kaiser Permanente, Nike, Pitney Bowes, and The Walt Disney Company. State and local governments recognized at the event were the State of Maryland, the State of Georgia, and the City of Fort Worth, Texas.

These organizations were recognized by the EPA for committing to provide their employees with (1) at least one core employee commuting benefit (e.g., transit fare subsidies or parking cashout), (2) at least three other employee commuting benefits

from a menu of options (flexible and tailored to a particular company, its employees, and the community), (3) a central contact for commuting benefits and services, (4) one centralized place (e.g., a web site) to get information about commuting benefits and services, and (5) regular updates on commuting benefits and services.

The EPA has committed to helping the commuter choice initiative and participants by (1) providing public recognition to Commuter Choice Leaders, (2) providing

Please turn to Page 15

Continued from Page 1

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technical assistance on commuting options and services, (3) providing communications and analytical tools, (4) helping employers and employees identify federal, state and local commuting options, benefits, and services, and (5) providing a forum for sharing their experiences with other employers.

When asked by the *Urban Transportation Monitor* why the work over many years by transportation management asso-

ciations, transit agencies, metropolitan planning organizations, cities, counties and even some state DOTs in promoting alternatives to the single occupant vehicle commute to commuters in their area were not recognized, the EPA indicated that it was a mistake not to do so.

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