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University gets nod for commuter ease

By Kendra Locke
Contributing Reporter

Commuting by car twice a day through traffic-congested New England can be a lot more stressful than a daily 10-minute walk up Science Hill.

But Yale University, along with People's Bank in Bridgeport, was recognized this week by the Environmental Protection Agency as one of Connecticut's "Best Workplaces for Commuters" for its commitment to easing the stress of transportation by promoting commuter-friendly alternatives for employees.

The "Best Workplaces for Commuters" initiative was established by the EPA and the U.S. Department of Transportation to encourage workplaces to reduce emissions and traffic congestion, as well as to establish a higher standard of living for workers.

Factors that contributed to Yale's recognition were its extensive shuttle service, its promotion of the train system and vanpools, its HomeBuyer program, and its Guaranteed Rides service, which offers emergency rides home for some employees. Furthermore, the University has been good about distributing information about these opportunities to its employees, said Jean Stimolo, the executive director of Rideworks, a nonprofit commuter organization.

Yale spokesman Tom Conroy said he was hopeful Yale's policies will inspire other companies to meet the Best Workplaces standards, as the EPA and Rideworks anticipate.

"The University is pleased at the recognition, and we'll also be pleased if through this program the EPA can spur additional commuter-friendly policies elsewhere," Conroy said.

Rideworks has been promoting the program and working with companies in the greater New Haven area to encourage their involvement in it. Stimolo said she was particularly pleased with Yale's participation in the evaluation.

"We were astounded at how many people walked, biked and took the shuttle to work," said Stimolo, referring to Yale's employees.

One of the most significant factors in Yale's recognition was its HomeBuyer Program, which offers a \$25,000 housing subsidy to employees who choose to buy homes in certain parts of New Haven near the campus. Over 500 employees have participated in the HomeBuyer program since its inception in 1994.

John Longbrake, assistant secretary for international affairs at Yale and a participant in the HomeBuyer Program, said that buying a house so close to campus was an excellent decision.

"It was a great investment opportunity -- it's close to campus, I save money on parking, and it's good for the environment. I walk and ride my bike everywhere," he said.

Longbrake said he has heard complaints from other coworkers about the difficulty of commuting to Yale from other parts of Connecticut. He said he encourages other people to take advantage of the HomeBuyer Program as well.

"It made it so much easier -- it wasn't really a question with the kind of incentive Yale offers," he said.

On top of congratulating companies that already promote commuter-friendly systems, the "Best Workplaces for Commuters" program also aims to encourage other workplaces to change their policies to meet these standards as well.

While Yale University and People's Bank were among the first participants to step forward and meet the requirements of this program, the EPA will come out with its official list of "Best Workplaces for Commuters" in May 2004 for the New York metropolitan region, which includes New York, New Jersey and Connecticut. This is the inaugural year of the initiative.

Other "Best Workplaces for Commuters" campaigns are taking place in Denver, the greater Washington region, Houston, New England, the Sacramento region, the San Francisco Bay Area, and Tucson.

Companies must fill out an application and meet certain criteria in order to qualify for this recognition, such as promoting carpools and offering transportation subsidies or tax-free commuter benefits. Local transportation organizations work with companies to help them meet these standards.

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