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26 Entrepreneur: At work

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More workplaces join commuter program

BY DAVID GOLL

Although the economy may be slowly turning around, most employers haven't had a lot of discretionary income to throw at new programs.

That makes it even more remarkable that the number of companies in the Bay Area qualifying for the "Best Workplaces for Commuters" program actually increased this year over 2002, when the program debuted.

"We went from 84 last year to 103 this year, which is amazing considering the economy," said the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency's Robin Snyder, who coordinates the program locally and oversees efforts in a growing number of metropolitan areas across the nation. "I'm really surprised and delighted. That's a pretty significant change, considering the high hurdles employers have to clear to get on the list."

Not to mention the inevitable do-gooder ennui that can set in when a problem such as traffic abates, even temporarily. The economic travails and resulting massive layoffs that have hit the Bay Area over the past three years have had one positive result: a major decrease in traffic congestion in an area considered one of the most gridlocked regions in the nation.

Making the list isn't for those who have a casual approach to the issue. It takes "an incredible commitment from employers" to get named to the list, Snyder says, because they have to persuade at least 14 percent of their work force to find some other way to get to work besides that great American pastime — solo commuting.

That can range from the most popular commute alternatives — carpooling, van-

How the Bay Area commutes

County	Drive alone	Carpool	Transit	Other
Alameda	61%	17%	15%	7%
Contra Costa	64%	20%	13%	4%
Solano	71%	22%	3%	5%
Santa Clara	72%	20%	4%	4%
San Francisco	8%	11%	35%	17%

* Due to rounding, numbers may not total 100 percent.

Source: RIDES for Bay Area Commuters Inc.

pooling or taking public transit — to riding bicycles, walking or even roller skating to work. Employees who make the commitment for even just one day a week get a variety of incentives, ranging from free bus passes to \$100 a month in tax-free federal subsidies to pay for public transit tickets.

While some companies around the region dropped off the list, 20 new East Bay employers joined the exclusive club, along with 26 returning companies in Alameda and Contra Costa counties. Just like last year, no Solano County businesses made the 2003 list.

Local newcomers are a diverse group, including Anixter Inc. of Pleasanton, Carr-America Realty Corp. of Pleasanton, Pronto Networks Inc. of Pleasanton, Cambridge Systematics Inc. of Oakland, the U.S. Department of Energy operations office in Oakland, the city of Walnut Creek and the Federal Bureau of Prisons in Dublin.

And many major East Bay employers returned to the commute "hall of fame" list, including ChevronTexaco Corp. of San Ramon, Chiron Corp. of Emeryville, the Metropolitan Transportation Commission in Oakland, Trust Administrators Inc. in Oakland,

PeopleSoft Inc. of Pleasanton, Mervyn's in Hayward, Sun Microsystems Inc.'s office complex in Newark and the cities of Berkeley, Lafayette, Pleasanton and San Ramon.

Most companies in Pleasanton's Hacienda Business Park would have a pretty easy time getting on the list, according to James Paxson, general manager of the sprawling 865-acre park, the entirety of which was designated a Best Workplaces for Commuters "district" this year, along with Bishop Ranch Business Park in San Ramon. The designation recognizes both parks' major efforts to promote alternative commute modes.

That yielded one of the more interesting members of this year's list, Sweet Tomatoes restaurant, located in a nearby strip mall, but included in Hacienda's boundaries. Hacienda and Bishop Ranch are two of only eight such districts nationwide and are the only ones in California.

Hacienda could have slacked off its efforts, considering the decrease in traffic resulting from the economic downturn. After reaching a high of 22,000 people working at 375 companies within its boundaries in early 2001, that total has slipped to 16,750 in about the

same number of companies today, Paxson said. That's a drop of 25 percent in worker numbers.

"In turn, we have seen a major decrease in one of our more popular commute alternatives, which allows both employees and the 3,400 residents who live in developments within Hacienda to ride Wheels buses for free," Paxson said. "From a high of 45,000 trips per month in early 2001, we're down to 23,000 today. That's a reflection of the steep decrease in total numbers of employees."

However, he added, even small jumps in hiring will mean major increases in traffic congestion. "It really won't take much to put this area right back in the same congestion we saw before the economic downturn," Paxson said.

Snyder said last year that the Bay Area was one of the first metropolitan areas chosen to participate in the "Best Workplaces for Commuters" program because of its strong public transit.

The program proved such a success with Bay Area employers that it expanded to Washington, D.C., Houston and Tucson, Ariz., this past summer, and Sacramento and Boston this fall. Next year, possible expansions include Denver, Seattle, Atlanta, Tampa, Fla., Portland, Ore., and Raleigh-Durham, N.C.

"Employers in all those areas are clamoring for the program," Snyder said.

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