

## Van-Pool or Stay at Home

### Firms urged to join program for less traffic, cleaner air

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*January 4, 2004*

The title isn't exactly sexy—Best Workplaces for Commuters.

But the federal Environmental Protection Agency and a regional coalition of transportation groups hope the designation will urge metropolitan-area companies to encourage workers to van-pool and telecommute.

The basic goal is to prompt a significant number of employees to get to their jobs in ways other than driving alone in cars. Presumably, this would cut down on traffic and make for a cleaner environment.

"This is basically a recognition program for companies that provide a substantial commuter benefits package to their employees," said Jennifer Covello, marketing manager for CommuterLink, a Queens-based nonprofit group that is among those involved.

The nationwide program kicked off in New York in November and

thus far about 25 companies have signed up, said Judy Landers, an EPA consultant in charge of the initiative. Its specific goals are to improve the quality of life for commuters, improve air quality and reduce traffic and congestion.

Here's how it works. Companies that are bestowed with a Best Workplace for Commuters title must offer at least one of the following primary benefits:

A monthly transit/van-pool pass subsidy to employees. Commuters who use mass transportation or a van pool to get to work receive a monthly voucher of at least \$30 to reimburse them for their train or van ticket.

Employers offering free or subsidized parking can give employees a choice to keep a parking space, or to accept a cash payment to give it up.

A significant telecommuting program that reduces 6 percent of commute trips on a monthly basis.

Participating companies also must provide three secondary benefits, which can be anything from partici-

pating in a regional transportation or air quality program to providing shuttles from transit stations.

Though no Long Island company has yet signed up, local officials say they're in discussions with a number of companies and have at least seven prospects, which they declined to name. Their goal is to have five companies signed up by May.

"There is an interest," said Amy Barone, program manager for Long Island Transportation Management, a Ronkonkoma-based nonprofit group that encourages commuters to share rides. "We're excited about having that first company on board and one that sets the pace for the rest of the employers on Long Island."

To encourage companies, the group has been awarded \$300,000 from the state Department of Transportation that it will bestow in grants of up to \$100,000 per company over the next two years, Barone said.

"We're offering grants for employers looking to achieve the goals," she

said. “By doing that, hopefully we’re assisting them in order to achieve some of these programs, whether they be car-pooling and van-pooling or telecommuting.”

Transportation advocates say the programs will save companies money in the long run.

“The programs are basically designed to save money in and of themselves,” said Covello, the marketing manager. “So once the initial investment is put out ... the company should start seeing a return on investments.”

For example, companies that have employees that telecommute save money on office space, and the companies receive tax benefits.

Covello said, “These companies are setting an example for other companies to sign up.”