

July 2008

Cost of the Commute: How Can We Decrease the Cost of Getting To Work

As I waited outside my building this morning for my drive to work, I struck up a conversation with an employee of a local window washing company, who was waiting for his company truck. We started to discuss the price of gas and the conversation inevitably led to the rising cost of driving to work. The young man asked me where I worked and when I told him “Burnside”, he said that he just turned down a job in Burnside that paid more, due to commuting challenges; the high price of gas negated the increased wages and the poor bus service to Burnside made taking the bus from our area of Halifax tedious. He told me “it’s too bad that we hadn’t met before – we could have carpooled”.

I doubt that I would have had this conversation a year ago; in fact it would have been unlikely even six months ago. Rising gas prices are gouging into our budgets and it seems as if we’ve finally met the tipping point where our behavior is starting to change. According to National Bank Financial, in May the volume of gasoline sales in Canada fell 5.9%¹ and according to BusinessWeek, 80% of commuters are concerned about commuting costs.² With increased competition for employees and retention challenges, it may be time for employers in Halifax to consider how to ease the pressure for their employees.

Some of the more common options in Halifax are:

- **Active Transportation** – the best way to get to work is by using the power within. Employers can encourage employees who can, to walk or bike to work by offering a **healthy living bonus** – money offered to employees annually, to use towards active transportation equipment, such as sneakers or a bike. Employers who are really keen might also consider **installing a shower** at their workplace. To read about Halifax’s Active Transportation Plan and for a bike route map visit <http://www.halifax.ca/TDM/activetransportation/index.html>.

41% of Halifax residents who live in the Urban Core and work in the Capita District walk to work. ¹

¹ <http://www.nationalpost.com/related/links/story.html?id=672753>

² Source: BusinessWeek Research Services and TransitCenter, February 2008

- **Transit** – the next best option to people power is to take MetroTransit. Employers may consider reimbursing employees who purchase transit passes. According to Derek Simon, Articled Clerk at Halifax’s Patterson Law “If the employer reimburses an employee for a transit pass, the employee does not get the tax credit, but the employee doesn’t have to claim the money for the bus pass as taxable income – therefore, the result is that the reimbursed bus pass is a tax neutral benefit.” Many employees are concerned about being late for work if they decide to take transit, due to missing the bus or late buses. Employers can ease this concern, by informing providing employees that there will be options to make up time when these incidents occur. Employees having trouble finding the optimal transit route to work can phone 490-4000 for assistance.
- **Carpooling** - employers can and should be encouraging employees to at least carpool, if taking transit or active transportation are not options. Employees can find someone to carpool with in HRM by using a free matching system at www.hrsmarttrip.ca. A similar program in Toronto called Smart Commute resulted in 10,000 cars being removed from the roads per weekday. To encourage carpooling, employers should offer flextime to increase the chances that employees will find a carpool that suits their work schedule.
- **Guaranteed ride home** – employers can offer employees who carpool or use transit to get to work a “guaranteed ride home” in case of emergencies. HRM currently applied for funding to develop a program which will help employers offset the cost of offering guaranteed rides home.
- **Live as close as you can to work** – the next time you move, consider your work options. You might even take this one step further, and write a letter to your councilor, expressing your desire for mixed used planning in our city and walkable communities.

After all, wouldn’t it be great to walk to work?

Mode of Transportation Halifax Metropolitan Area Census 2006	
Car, truck, van as driver	65.12%
Car, truck, van as passenger	10.64%
Public transit	11.86%
Walked	10.11%
Bicycle	0.98%
Motorcycle	0.13%
Taxicab	0.28%
Other method	0.88%