

Ride sharing revs up

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The Patriot Ledger

Posted Jun 28, 2008 @ 04:00 AM

Last update Jul 01, 2008 @ 09:24 AM

QUINCY — More commuters are ditching their cars and climbing aboard corporate shuttle buses as employers make it easier to commute to suburban office parks. Ridership on Blue Cross Blue Shield of Massachusetts' shuttles from MBTA stations in Quincy and Hingham is up nearly 15 percent from last year.

Toting a tray of Dunkin' Donuts iced coffee, Jen Louie of Quincy disembarked from the shuttle in Hingham on Thursday. Louie takes the Red Line from North Quincy to Braintree and picks up the shuttle for the ride to the Technology Park. Her commute usually takes 30 minutes.

"It's free, and it's always on time," said Louie, a supervisor for Blue Cross.

More employees are signing up for carpooling programs, according to transportation consultants, as the prospect of a gallon of gas burns a hole in household budgets.

A survey of human resources managers last month indicated that employers are gradually taking steps to ease the commute burden. Nearly 23 percent of the companies contacted said they are offering condensed workweeks, such as a four-day arrangement, Chicago outplacement consultants Challenger, Gray & Christmas reported.

South Shore Transportation Management Association, a nonprofit partnership between local industry and state agencies, is launching a new shuttle service when Blue Cross Blue Shield of Massachusetts opened its 325,000-square-foot office building in Quincy in August. Nearly 1,000 people work at the complex.

About 400 Blue Cross employees ride the free shuttle each week from the Braintree MBTA station to the Hingham campus. About 800 more take a shuttle to its Quincy offices from the North Quincy MBTA station.

Ridership has increased nearly 15 percent from last year, mainly because of rising gas prices, spokeswoman Katherine

The service is run by A&A Metro Transportation of Bridgewater, which provides corporate shuttles for nine companies in Boston. From January through June 1, ridership on the company's shuttles was up 10.5 percent compared with the same period in 2007, operations manager Joe McCallum said.

Although the Hingham shuttle serves only the Blue Cross facility, there are discussions about expanding it to other locations, said John Stobierski, vice president of the South Shore Chamber of Commerce in Quincy.

The program also includes a ride-matching program and emergency ride service for employees who have to work late or for a family emergency.

Reebok International, OneBeacon Insurance and Computershare — all major employers at Canton's Royall Street office — will subsidize the Neponset Valley shuttle bus service sponsored by the Neponset Valley Transportation Management Association.

The service offers 21 trips daily between Royall Street and the Quincy Center and Ashmont MBTA stations. Employees who do not subsidize the service pay \$2 per ride.

The service began in 2007 after the Neponset Valley TMA received a state Highway Department grant.

“It gives an opportunity for individuals who live outside the suburbs to have access to those companies,” said Dustir the transportation management association. “They really aren’t centrally located near commuter rail or subway and individuals who want to use mass transit.”

In April, the Canton shuttle bus attracted 1,797 riders, Rhue said. A second shuttle from the University Avenue MBT 1,005 riders in April. Ridership is comparable to 2007 levels, Rhue said.

Ride-matching programs that connect potential carpoolers with each other also are gaining in popularity.

TransAction Associates, a Waltham company that manages ride-share programs for companies, saw a recent spike in ride-matching, with more than 250 new sign-ups in the last 10 days, President Cindy Frene said.

“We’re getting an incredible amount of action,” she said. “It’s great because people are definitely looking for an opti

Subsidizing public transportation is another prevalent measure, with 17.5 percent of companies surveyed saying the employees pay for riding mass transit. Blue Cross Blue Shield of Massachusetts, for example, provides a 30-percent pass subsidy.

Since the 1990s, Tufts Medical Center has allowed employees to buy subsidized MBTA passes, with the current subs monthly passes up to \$40, spokeswoman Julie Jette said. About 20 additional employees are taking advantage of th year compared with last year.

Tufts also is waiving the fee to place classified ads for carpools in its employee newsletter.

Canton’s Dunkin’ Brands allows employees to find carpool partners on its internal Web site, spokesman Andrew Ma offers flexible work schedules to employees on a case-by-case basis, but not in a direct response to the commuter cru Mastrangelo said.

The Challenger, Gray & Christmas survey also showed lingering corporate inertia amid the gas crisis, with nearly 43 companies saying they hadn’t taken any steps to cushion the effects. More than a third said job candidates turned d because of long commutes.

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What companies are doing to cut commuting costs

Condensed workweek (such as four 10-hour days): 22.9%

Organize car pools: 20%

Subsidize public transportation: 17.5%

Other (gas card prizes, monthly transportation stipend, etc.): 16.3%

Expanded telecommuting opportunities: 14.3%

Encourage bicycling or walking to work: 11.2%

Subsidize gas costs: 5.7%

Offer shuttle services: 2.9%

None of the above: 42.9%

Source: Challenger, Gray & Christmas Inc. survey of 100 human resource executives, May 2008

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