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Telecommuting Interest Soars

Pump Prices Spur Workers To Abandon Long Drives

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When gas prices sped past \$3 a gallon in the days after Hurricane Katrina, Sherrie Bell hit upon a quick way to avoid the pinch at the pump.

She decided to stop going to work.

Or at least stop working downtown. In a memo Thursday to her boss, Bell, a paralegal at the U.S. Education Department, requested permission to work two days a week from a federally funded telecommuting center 15 miles from her home in Southern Maryland.

"It's definitely the way of the future for workers," said Bell, 38, who first tried teleworking one day a week last fall instead of commuting 1 1/2 hours. "There's no doubt about it. It's such a cost-saving tool."

With gas prices in the Washington region among the highest in the nation, increasing numbers of beleaguered commuters are looking to trade two-hour treks on congested freeways for speedy telecommutes via the information superhighway, teleworking advocates say.

"Unfortunately, it takes a kind of unbelievable event like this to get people's attention and force them to change the way they do things," said Bob Smith, director of the Silver Spring-based ITAC, formerly known as the International Telework Association & Council.

Teleworking advocates -- including the federal government -- say they hope widespread consternation about rising fuel prices will prove to be the tipping point needed to bring about a telecommuting revolution. And they have been scrambling to convert the public to their cause.

Just days after the levees in New Orleans burst, the U.S. Office of Personnel Management sent out a government-wide memo urging telecommuting as a way to alleviate a post-Katrina gas shortage. Telework centers around the Washington region quickly offered free use of their space. And telecommuting experts say their phones have been ringing off the hook.

For years, transportation experts in Washington have dreamed of a boom in telecommuting as a way to ease traffic congestion and reduce the environmental impacts of car emissions. Every worker who begins telecommuting could reduce government transportation spending by \$3,000, according to a study by George Washington University's Center for Economic Research.

But widespread telecommuting has not materialized. Although a newly released study by the Metropolitan

Washington Council of Governments shows the number of teleworkers has increased -- from 11.3 percent of commuters in 2001 to 12.8 percent in 2004 -- experts believe a much higher proportion of workers could telecommute.

While they are optimistic now, they say they recognize that efforts to encourage mass telecommuting have not fulfilled their expectations.

Ronald F. Kirby, transportation planning director of the council of governments, said the main obstacle to teleworking is that some bosses worry about supervising workers 100 miles away. "There is a strong level of resistance by middle managers," he said, even though studies have shown employees are more productive when teleworking.

In the wake of Hurricane Katrina, though, a string of local and federal officials -- including Georgia Gov. Sonny Perdue (R) -- have urged citizens to turn to teleworking as a way of conserving gas. On Sept. 2, the U.S. Office of Personnel Management sent a memo to heads of federal agencies with the same message.

"Telework presents agencies with significant opportunities to reduce fuel consumption and traffic congestion," wrote Linda M. Springer, the agency's director. "This will make a significant contribution toward dealing with the fuel shortage problem we are now facing."

To encourage workers to give telecommuting a try, the U.S. General Services Administration, which funds 14 Washington Metropolitan Telework Centers from the Chesapeake Bay to the Blue Ridge Mountains, announced that federal employees could use the sites for free until the end of the year. The sites provide all the amenities of an office: phones, computers, fax and photocopy machines.

Soon phones at the centers were ringing continuously. Tammy Sparks-Ussery, executive director of Washington Metropolitan Telework Centers, said inquiries from potential teleworkers at some sites have increased since Hurricane Katrina, from about five inquiries a week to about 12 every day. Centers across the region have scheduled open houses Friday for potential teleworkers (see <http://www.wmtc.org/> for details).

The telework centers aren't overflowing yet, Sparks-Ussery said, because it usually takes workers about 30 days to get approval from their agencies. "But in about a month, I think we might have a waiting line," she said.

Private companies also are taking a second look at telecommuting. AeroAstro, an Ashburn-based satellite and space systems business, announced yesterday that it is urging its employees to telework at least one day a week because of the gas shortage caused by Hurricane Katrina.

Richard Fleeter, the company's president, said the policy, which will reduce employees' transportation costs by 20 percent, is a valuable recruiting tool. In a statement, he said the move would "attract to our work force the most highly talented people regardless of their geographic proximity to our home in Ashburn."

As she continues to make the 90-minute commute from her home in Calvert County to her office near Union Station, Bell sometimes makes calculations about how much money -- \$1,000, \$2,000, more? -- she would save by telecommuting twice a week.

If she isn't allowed to telework twice a week, Bell said she probably will have to stop eating out and going

to movies on weekends. But she's crossing her fingers that it won't come to that. "I just really hope my telework request is approved," she said.

Staff writer Elissa Silverman contributed to this report.

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