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State workers cherish parking

Employees who pay bargain rates to park in Raleigh say it's hard to join efforts to curb commuter traffic

By Bruce Siceloff

State government commuters are paying record gas prices in 2004, along with everybody else, when they fill up their tanks on the way to work. But when they park at the office, they're back in the bargain days of 1977.

Nearly 7,300 state workers pay \$10 or \$15 a month -- rates unchanged in 27 years -- for reserved parking spots in downtown Raleigh.

Parking is a cherished workplace benefit across the Triangle, particularly for state workers who have suffered several years of wage stagnation. But cheap parking may not be good for the public health.

As an enticement to drive alone to work, state government's abundance of low-cost parking runs against the thrust of its new clean-air campaign to encourage commuters to park their cars at home.

"If I can park for \$10 a month," said Miriam S. Perry, the state public transportation director, "you're going to have to do a lot to convince me to give up that car."

To curb road congestion and traffic-related air pollution, the state wants to set an example for other employers in the region. Starting with their own employees, state officials hope to foster new workplace incentives that will reverse the growth of single-passenger commuter travel.

So far, state government serves as a prime example of how difficult it can be

to change employees' driving habits.

State agencies have had a weak start with telecommuting. But transit subsidies have helped convert a few hundred state workers into bus and van pool riders.

Since September, state workers have enjoyed free travel on Capital Area Transit buses. And state government is the largest customer for Triangle Transit Authority van pools, which ferry 246 state workers to downtown Raleigh each day.

Bus and van pool riders skip the stress of rush-hour driving. Ginger M. Faircloth, who works for the Wildlife Resources Commission, and Revenue Department employee Sharon D. Maynor chuckled and chattered one morning last week as they hopped out of their 15-passenger van.

"It's fun," Faircloth said of their daily 75-minute van pool commute from Coats, near Benson. "You meet people. You save gas and wear and tear on your



STAFF PHOTOS BY ROBERT WILLETT

State employee Tina Kuykendall relaxes at left in the back of a Triangle Transit Authority van for the ride home from Raleigh on Friday. The van was headed to Fuquay-Varina and Coats.

car. Your day goes better."

Susan W. Austin, an eight-year vanpooler working for the Insurance Department, happily leaves her car at home in Smithfield.

"What can you do with a car up here?" Austin said. "You don't have time at lunch to go anywhere. The only downside would be if you had an emergency and had to get home. But I've never had one where there wasn't someone who could take me."

Still, the allure of cheap parking is powerful. With 7,279 parking spots available for about 9,600 state workers in downtown Raleigh, there's a waiting list with about 1,100 names.

The wait for a parking spot typically takes two to four years. Many state workers hold on to their reserved parking spaces even after they switch to van pools, CAT buses or telecommuting.

"Is it a good investment? Yes and no," Faircloth said of her parking space, number 2030, in a deck near the Archdale Building. "It's a little money wasted. But it's that security thing you need, in case you have to use your car."

Mandates loom

The state Department of Environment and Natural Resources, the Department of Transportation and other agencies face state and federal mandates to reduce traffic congestion and ozone pollution. A 1999 state clean-air law calls for more telecommuting and other strategies to reduce by 20 percent the combined miles all state employees drive to work each



State employees leave the garage beneath the state government mall. These spaces cost \$15 a month.

day.

Agency leaders say state government will qualify this fall for the national "Best Workplaces for Commuters" voluntary program. The requirements include a pledge that within 18 months, at least 14 percent of employees will get to work without driving solo.

The state would have to provide substantial commuter benefits, such as giving workers at least \$30 per month for transit fares -- double the current bus and van-pool subsidy -- or letting many of them work from home.

The DOT will oversee the effort and set up a commuter affairs office. Its first task

will be to find out how many employees drive alone to work now, how many use other modes of travel and how many miles they go each day.

"Whatever we provide is going to have to be convenient," Perry said. "It's going to have to be flexible so that people with various work schedules will be able to take advantage of it."

"We're talking about changing social behavior. It's not going to be easy."

Part of the challenge will be to lessen the power of parking without weakening its worth to employees. State officials have no plans to increase parking fees for workers who haven't had a permanent pay raise since 2000.

State workers began paying the current monthly rates, \$10 in surface lots and \$15 in parking decks, in 1977. The fees originally paid for parking improvements.

Employee parking fees today -- worth less than \$1 million last year -- are believed to fall well short of the state's total parking expenses. State officials do not calculate the cost of the parking subsidy.

If the state goes through with the proposed sale to private developers of a six-block area along Blount Street, parking space for 925 state workers will be lost. A consultant is studying parking needs and whether the state should build more decks.

A time warp

While state parking rates have been frozen since 1977, commercial rates in downtown Raleigh have risen.

Regina McLaurin, vice president of McLaurin Parking Co., pegged current market rates at \$40 to \$50 for surface lots and \$70 for parking decks.

Parking subsidies for other downtown Raleigh employers vary widely. A few hundred News & Observer workers pay

their employer \$21.67 per month. Progress Energy's downtown workers are reimbursed for parking on a salary-based sliding scale, from \$30 to \$50 per month. Seventy municipal workers pay \$50 monthly to use the city's deck, where other customers pay \$70.

Telecommuting was hailed as a promising alternative for state workers in 1997, after the state auditor predicted payoffs in productivity, clean air and cost savings. A pilot study involved 250 state employees who worked from home several days a week.

But many agency managers were uncomfortable supervising workers they didn't see in the office every day. The DOT tightened requirements and trimmed its force of telecommuters last fall.

Of the 610 telecommuters now employed by the state's labor, agriculture, transportation and natural resources departments, agency spokespeople said, only a few are based downtown. Most are field inspectors whose jobs involve a lot of travel.

DOT officials say they're still determined to help hundreds more government employees work from home at least a few days a week. They're looking for tips from executives at Cisco Systems, where large numbers of employees work from home.

State government telecommuter Reba B. Mason is concerned about Raleigh's "outrageous" commercial parking rates, even though she works at home in Fuquay-Varina four days a week.

Mason, a graphic artist for the Department of Crime Control and Public Safety, pays \$15 a month for a parking space she uses each Tuesday. That's when she delivers finished work in Raleigh and picks up more work to take home.

She prizes her parking spot as a perquisite of seniority.

"If you can get one, you hold on to it," Mason said. "I think maybe it's just state government mentality."