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Initiative Turns Kitsap into a Telework Lab

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The Washington State Legislature is currently considering funding an initiative that would create a template for all communities to implement telecommuting programs. As of Thursday morning this proposal was represented by a \$150,000 line item in the transportation budget, to be allocated for the development of a telework roadmap.

“This represents the most efficient \$150,000 ever spent in transportation history,” said Poulsbo City Councilman Ed Stern, who is an active supporter of the concept. “It’s a lot less than what it takes to construct a single traffic signal.”

Telecommuting is defined as the loosening of the 40-hour office week, allowing and encouraging employees to spend a defined time period each week working at home through the Internet or a private network rather than commuting to the office or other location. The allocated funds will allow the creation of a toolkit, “telework in a box,” that will address how to create a telecommuting environment. Employers and employees will receive different kits which, in one form, will consist of pre-printed flashcards in a small box.

Users will pull out the cards and check off the tasks one at a time. Stern said the flashcard model will be for people who are strangers to the process and require a simple illustration of the concept. Down the line, the information will be presented on a Web page that will be accessible to any community that wants to incorporate a telecommuting model.

Once in place, the program will recruit 75 companies to participate. While many will be local, a plurality will originate from Pierce, King and Snohomish counties — all common commuting destinations for Kitsap residents. “Kitsap County is the perfect laboratory for this experiment,” Stern said. “We are isolated by bridges and ferries. As a result, we have one of the longest average commutes in the country. Workers will embrace this because it will allow them to spend more time with their families and doing what’s important to them.” While employees will jump at this chance, Stern acknowledges that employers will need more convincing to get on board. Many businesses resist only because it is different from how they have done things for years.

So he appeals to profit, the reason businesses exist in the first place. “When I can persuade companies they can increase their bottom line by telecommuting, they will be convinced,” Stern said. “It can increase their deliverables and decrease their carbon footprint at the same time. “There is a whole middle-level management mentality that workers need to report and be seen in order to be productive,” Stern said. “The manager needs to know they are managing. But it makes more sense to manage productivity rather than measuring people’s relationship to the clock.”

In plainer terms, Stern suggests that productivity is better measured by how much a person accomplishes rather than where they accomplish it. Stern said a company can use increase personnel without requiring a corresponding increase in office space through “hot bunking,” a process used on submarines. According to the plan, several workers would share the same desk but use it on different days. While this violates the “personal space” orientation that rules the modern office, Stern said workers will give up this proprietary behavior if the alternative is a few more hours a week with their family or time not spent sitting in traffic.

Part of the telework planning process is to determine which employees are suited to telecommute. The first qualifier, according to Stern, divides people who work with their mind and work with their hands. The latter group, those who pump gas or bake cakes, would not qualify. Further, someone who needs others to be productive or spends half their time on the Internet would, on the surface, not qualify for the program.

Stern, however, said this might not matter. A telecommuter's output is measured objectively, such as documents or spreadsheets completed. In that sense, whether someone spends the whole day on news sites is irrelevant if the project is finished by deadline.

Additionally, those who work with their hands will detect a change in their own lives, even if their work itself does not change. If a large number of people embrace telecommuting, traffic density will decrease, cutting commute times and allowing even those who don't telecommute to have more time with their families.

"With telecommuting, everyone spends less time sitting in their car, on a ferry, or on a bus," Stern said. "Never mind the rising fares, the ferry system doesn't have enough boats to serve the public. As we drive to work, we spew an amazing amount of carbon. So telecommuting can cure several multiple ills, and is easier to put into place than building a bicycle lane."

The telework efforts are driven by the Kitsap Regional Coordinating Council, which will administer and develop the toolkit construction. Additionally, all local state legislators are supporting the program, predominantly in the belief that it will ease the traffic burden. "This has a lot of support," said Rep. Christine Rolfes (D-Bainbridge Island). "There is a sense that it will solve a lot of the state's transportation problems."