

## **Our View: Consider Telecommuting, 4-Day Work Week**

June 12, 2008

Add high gasoline prices to the reasons Treasure Valley employers should take a hard look at employees' jobs to see if the jobs truly require commuting to work five days a week.

Job flexibility has been a goal of family advocates and others for years. It's good business, too: Employers who think through plans to let some employees work at home can boost productivity, save on overhead costs and send a message of confidence and trust that boosts employee motivation and retention.

Gov. Butch Otter has another motivation: reducing Idaho's carbon footprint. Since he announced last year that he wants to boost telecommuting, Otter's program has advanced gradually and quietly. The state has drawn up a detailed 21-page telecommuting policy that any employer or employee can consult as a guide for solving potential problems like supervisor-employee communication and home information-technology capability. The policy includes a model employer-worker agreement.

But there are no reliable data yet on how many state workers are telecommuting. Only last month, Otter asked department heads to tally and report this data. One agency that has, the Department of Environmental Quality, says 20 of its 378 workers telecommute, usually one or two days a week. That's just more than 5 percent of the work force. Twenty more DEQ employees work condensed schedules - usually four 10-hour days. That eliminates one-fifth of these workers' commutes.

Otter has pushed to curb greenhouse gases and improve energy efficiency. He has issued executive orders to reduce fossil-fuel use by curbing purchases of gas-guzzling sport-utility vehicles and developing a greenhouse gas emission inventory. Telecommuting is one piece of that larger Otter agenda.

"We're kind of a laboratory for this," Otter spokesman Jon Hanian said. "Would he like it to go faster? Probably. But I know he wants to make sure he's doing it right and not making a lot of mistakes as we go."

Otter's idea is good - and leadership is needed. Local data are not available, but a just-released study of employers by the Alfred P. Sloan Foundation shows the provision of flexible jobs has not changed significantly in 10 years.

Rising commuting costs are especially tough on people in low-wage jobs, said Patricia Kempthorne, founder of the Twiga Foundation in Boise and the wife of former Idaho

governor and current Interior Secretary Dirk Kempthorne. The foundation promotes family consciousness in workplaces, especially flexibility.

“A low-wage earner’s income is not going to go up, because with gas prices going up, it’s costing the businesses more too,” she said. “We’ve got to find solutions.”

Telecommuting won’t work for everyone. Employees who spend most of their time at a computer or on the phone may be good candidates, while front-line customer-service workers are not. Some employees work more effectively in a structured workplace environment than at home.

And workers themselves sometimes prefer to keep the standard five-day, eight-hour schedule. The state Division of Human Resources offered workers the option of working four 10-hour days a week this summer, but only a few have taken it, said Judie Wright, the division administrator. Some workers have children in day care centers that don’t open early enough, or in summer activities that require a parent at home by late afternoon. Some have trouble sustaining work through a 10-hour a day. Some depend on the Treasure Valley’s bare-bones bus system, whose service ends too early in the evening.

Now that gasoline exceeds \$4 a gallon and is still rising, workers and employers alike should think about ways to cut their commuting costs. That could reduce congestion and help the Valley’s air quality. Coupled with a better public-transportation system and increased use of alternative transportation like bicycling, walking and van pooling, work schedules that curb commuting can reduce the financial pain many people are now suffering because of our dependence on costly oil.

*“Our View” is the editorial position of the Idaho Statesman. It is an unsigned opinion expressing the consensus of the Statesman’s editorial board. To comment on an editorial or suggest a topic, e-mail [editorial@idahostatesman.com](mailto:editorial@idahostatesman.com).*