

## Let's Use 'Telework' To Grease Economy

By Jay Hancock

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One superhighway is jammed and expensive. The other is open and cheap.

So, next time, take the route to work with no choking emissions, no raised middle fingers and no \$4 gas.

Sit at your computer and drive straight ahead.

Now that Maryland has built one of the world's best broadband networks, let's use it to grease the economy and cut costs ranging from filling the tank to pollution to road construction to high blood pressure.

Oil at \$140 and what's called "telework" were made for each other like migraines and aspirin. Bosses of Maryland, do everybody a favor - maybe even yourselves - and let employees work from home a day or two a week.

"We've found that folks can telecommute and be more productive when they do it," says Malcolm D. Woolf, director of the Maryland Energy Administration. "My perception is that employees are more focused because they're not interrupted by colleagues. They're able to read the big document and get focus time."

Many bosses worry if they can't see people toiling, but this is as outdated as it is benighted. Among computers' many advantages is their ability to measure work accomplished, wherever it is done. Instant messaging ought to satisfy even hovering, neurotic supervisors.

Business groups, especially the Greater Baltimore Committee, need to show more leadership on this. When it comes to telework, business is in danger of being out-innovated by - horror! - government.

Numerous state governments, including Maryland's, are talking about telecommuting options. The Department of Budget and Management has evaluated state jobs with the goal of designating 10 percent of the work force as telecommuting-eligible.

On the federal side, 6 percent of employees - more than 100,000 - already work from home at least part of the time, according to the Office of Personnel Management. The

Telework Improvements Act, passed last month by the House, would require the identification of every telework-eligible position and promote telecommuting “to the maximum extent possible without diminishing employee performance or agency operations.”

But the biggest gain to be had from telecommuting is from corporations and other private employers (including nonprofits), which make up 80 percent of Maryland’s economy.

Four-dollar gas “may be the catalyst that gets the employers who may be on the fence to start looking seriously at it,” says Gil Gordon, a New Jersey-based consultant who helps companies design telecommuting programs.

Towson-based toolmaker Black & Decker is developing what it calls a WAH policy - work at home - for a September rollout.

“In those cases where the manager and the employee agree that the employee can work effectively from home, we are setting up more of those arrangements,” says Don Lee, vice president of information technology.

Some companies, such as Baltimore-based Constellation Energy and Sparks-based spice purveyor McCormick, have had informal telework policies for a long time, worked out between boss and employee. McCormick is adopting a companywide policy and promoting it to eligible employees, says spokesman Jim Lynn.

Baltimore-based money manager T. Rowe Price is one of the few companies to measure telework patterns. Only 3.5 percent of employees work part time or full time from home, but “we’re definitely seeing a growing number of associates taking advantage of teleworking, and we know part of that increase is due to the growing cost of commuting,” says Price spokesman Brian Lewbart.

If you live in Howard County and your car gets 25 miles to a gallon, you’re paying \$130 a month to commute to downtown Baltimore. But working from home won’t just help you and your company. Telecommuting spins off “external” benefits such as decreased traffic and lower pollution.

Policymakers and business leaders such as the Greater Baltimore Committee and the Maryland Chamber of Commerce should be all over this. But these groups are still focused on lobbying for new, expensive roads when it won’t cost anything to promote telework except smart thinking and communication.

We’ve already bought and paid for the most expensive part: Maryland’s broadband network. This year Forbes magazine ranked Baltimore as the country’s fifth-most-wired city.

People have been talking about telecommuting for years. “But the situation now is very different from what it was 10, 15 or 20 years ago, when there wasn’t such a widespread

installed base of equipment that's suited for telework," says consultant Gordon. "Now, it's sort of a no-brainer for people to spend a day or two a week at home without it being a big deal."

Especially when you consider two other Maryland characteristics: nightmare commutes and a high proportion of technology, sales, writing and analysis jobs that don't have to be done on site. No pain. All gain. It's the cheapest and most effective response to the energy crisis we can muster.