

## RIDE SOLUTIONS

# Commuting can be a win-win situation



Why are Blue Ridge Regional companies interested in Ride Solutions, the Roanoke-based community service that connects commuters and saves time and money?

You mean besides the opportunity to increase air quality, improve the environment and be good corporate citizens?

"There are multiple benefits to companies," says Jeremy Holmes, Ride Solutions program director. "An obvious one is the human resources angle. This is an employee benefit that costs the company nothing. It's also good for facilities that have constrained surrounding space. We can help reduce the parking demand."

Major employers in the Blue Ridge Region that have come on board with the Ride Solutions program include Virginia Tech, Rowe Furniture, Echostar, WSL Newschannel 10, the Western Virginia Water Authority, Shenandoah Life and New River Community College. A number of other businesses are also considering the program.

Ride Solutions is a grant-funded program serving the New River and Roanoke valleys, the Alleghany Highlands

and surrounding counties. It is operated by the Roanoke Valley-Alleghany Regional Commission in cooperation with the New River Valley Planning District Commission.

The requirements of Ride Solutions partner companies are simple and straightforward. "Providing access for us to communicate with employees is the biggest thing," Holmes says. "Including the message in company e-mails and newsletters, giving company approval is what we're looking for. The buy-in from HR is important."

Most members of the workforce clearly recognize that carpooling can improve air quality. They also know that it can save them money – with fuel costs experiencing a major spike in recent weeks.

Holmes says the average commuter spends more on transportation-related issues than health care. These issues not only include fuel, vehicle maintenance and insurance – but in many instances, the cost of parking.

Employees may be less cognizant of some of the other benefits to them, including the opportunity to catch up on work

or relax while enjoying the ride. In some cases, the time to discuss a project with a co-worker is valuable. There also is the social aspect of getting to know other employees in various departments or neighbors who work in other businesses.

"The biggest barrier is the fear that employees won't have transportation in an emergency," Holmes says. "Our Guaranteed Ride Home (GRH) Service provides a free taxi ride home in case of emergencies. This program overcomes that obstacle. We've found emergencies don't come up nearly as much as some employees initially fear."

Ride-sharing is also attractive to companies and employees where reliable transportation is a difficulty. The ability to count on the employee being on the job, on time, provides relief to both the employer and employee, improving productivity and morale along the way. Holmes has found that call centers located outside city limits are often interested in Ride Solutions.

Ride Solutions can match riders by geographic dispersal

or by company. "We use a GIS database," Holmes says, "and we can match companies' employees against other commuters in the area. We're able to provide a list of likely car-pool matches."

Perhaps most important to companies and employees is that there is no cost to participate in the program. Ride Solutions does all of the planning – suggesting incentives and contests to make the process fun and helping companies take advantage of tax savings and deferrals.

"We're here to help businesses and commuters save money and time," Holmes says. "We're looking for an opportunity to educate commuters and change the way they think about getting to work."

"Improving environmental air quality and reducing energy consumption is our ultimate goal, and we see our service as a way to stem the tide of unhealthy ozone levels."

Ride Solutions is not limited to carpooling and bus transportation. The organization also promotes bicycle use and has a program that provides free bike racks to qualified companies.

"Connecting the region's commuters"

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