

Community Snapshot: Edmonton's Job Bus Preparations

Challenge

Lack of transportation and child care are widely acknowledged by job seekers as the two top barriers to securing and keeping employment. Meanwhile, employers are scrambling to find staff in a highly competitive job market. Helping people get to work and take care of their children builds both corporate and personal prosperity. Inspired by the work of Opportunities Niagara Region to institute specialized transit routes for employers and employees in the Niagara Falls tourism industry, Vibrant Communities Edmonton (VCE) participants began investigating the creation of a similar service for large employers in their city.

Setting up a "Job Bus" program is particularly vital in Edmonton where outlying industrial areas are so underserved by public transit that job seekers choose not to apply for well-paying positions in those locations. Statistics Canada confirms that the farther a job is located from a city centre, the less likely that people will use public transport to get there. Statistics also indicate that public transport is most heavily used by youth, people living on low incomes, recent immigrants and women – the groups most likely to seek work in industrial and outlying areas [Heisz and LaRochelle-Côté 2005].

Strategy

In the fall of 2006, members of VCE met with representatives from a large Edmonton transportation company to investigate the logistics of setting up a Job Bus program. VCE also began exploring the concept with Maple Leaf Foods, whose Edmonton food processing plant employs nearly 200 people. In order to provide transit options that would be responsive to employee needs, VCE designed a transportation survey which they administered to Maple Leaf staff members in early 2007. After reviewing the survey results and analysis, the company decided to continue exploring the financial and logistical considerations associated with establishing a Job Bus. VCE continues to promote the Job Bus concept with other large Edmonton employers; three more are in the process of completing the survey and another three are at the information-gathering stage.

Though the original transportation company's directors were interested in the initiative, City Councillor Mike Nickel brought VCE together with Charles Stolte, Transit Manager with Edmonton Transit System. Charles was interested in the possibility of making some systemic changes that would allow a Job Bus program to become an option for system users.

Early in February 2007, Charles was able to provide cost estimates for the initiative and assigned a special projects manager to the file. Meetings between the Edmonton Transit System and representatives from Maple Leaf are continuing. A cost-sharing arrangement will eventually see employers and employees contributing to the overall cost of the Job Bus. As in Niagara, routes will be operated to accommodate the shift schedules and neighbourhoods of the employees involved.

VCE's current role in the Job Bus initiative involves recruitment, brokerage and facilitation. With Edmonton Transit and employers now engaged in the process of defining Job Bus operations and costs, VCE will continue to supply information to prospective employers, and provide or administer transportation surveys and data analysis, as requested.

Impacts

Because the initiative is still in the planning stage, no firm cost or participation figures are yet available. Possible extensions of the Job Bus could include outreach from employers to employees from particular cultural groups. The issue of transportation may provide an opening through which to better meet the needs and concerns of newcomers, youth, Aboriginal and immigrant groups.

In addition to the Job Bus concept, VCE is exploring an employer-sponsored car ownership program. Employers and employees would each contribute a monthly payment over a five-year period to cover the license, insurance, maintenance and purchase costs associated with operating an economy car. Jeff Polovick,

Founder and CEO of Driving Force Vehicle Rental, Sales and Leasing (www.drivingforce.ca), created the concept and is working with an insurance company to design a blanket policy for the project – something never before done within the insurance industry.

While there are disadvantages to Alberta's energy and employment boom, one of the positive outcomes is that companies are looking for innovative ways to recruit and retain new employees. Human resources practices like the Job Bus and car ownership programs require immediate systemic and infrastructure changes that will ensure their longevity during quieter economic times.

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Reference

Heisz, A., and S. LaRochelle-Côté. (2005). *Working and Commuting in Census Metropolitan Areas, 1996-2001*. Ottawa: Statistics Canada, June. <http://www.statcan.ca/english/research/89-613-MIE/89-613-MIE2005007.htm>

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