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B.C.-based initiative aims to save Canadians from long commutes to work

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VICTORIA, B.C. — Commuting to and from work is a soul- and health-destroying horror show for millions of Canadians, but hope is in sight, according to CloseCommute Systems Inc. The Victoria-based benefit corporation today is launching a website, app and toolkit with a mission to “radically reduce commutes” while increasing productivity and cutting greenhouse gas emissions.

“Within two years we can get 5% to 10% of the vehicles off the roads and save people hundreds of hours each year,” says CEO Bruce Batchelor. “We just need long-commuters to become aware that there is a proven, simple solution and to insist their employers get on board.”

The way to improve commuting efficiency is not complicated, Batchelor says, and it costs employers next to nothing to implement. A multi-location employer (for example, a bank or school district) will allow workers who now commute long distances – and would prefer to work closer to home – to switch workplaces with someone doing the same job at a different location so both can reduce their daily commuting time. As well, the employer will consider candidates’ commuting distances during hiring and internal transfer selection.

“Originally called ‘proximate commuting’, this strategy was developed and proven in the 1990s, but it was never adopted by larger employers,” says Batchelor. “It’s time to have this solution widely known and for us all to take responsibility for making it the new normal, the ‘best practice’ for all employers, and an expectation by all employees and unions.”

Batchelor’s team has developed what they call the key “catalysts” for triggering widespread change in the current toxic, unstable, inefficient commuting situation: two web tools, a toolkit for employers and a solid business case based on extensive research. All will be available through CloseCommute.com and almost all are free.

A “Quick Calculator” allows anyone to determine the annual cost, hours wasted, CO₂ emissions and kilometres travelled for any given home and work location, for any time schedule. “Most people will be staggered by what it is actually costing them in dollars and time,” says Batchelor.

A website visitor can then use the web app to locate alternative, closer work locations and immediately know the savings in time (typically in the hundreds of hours per year), money and emissions. Armed with that knowledge and custom-generated documents, the person can submit a transfer request to their employer. Included is this kicker for the boss: Reducing employee commutes reduces human resources costs and increases productivity.

The web app user may also meet a “swap match” – someone doing the same work who is ready to switch locations immediately.

The proximate commuting strategy is potent: A 500-employee demonstration project for Key Bank in the Seattle area in the mid-1990s saw participating branches slash total employee

commuting distance by 17 per cent within 15 months. Batchelor believes that, with a modern toolkit that greatly simplifies peer-exchanges, employers will achieve reductions in the 25-per-cent range or greater. CloseCommute's analysis of employee-commuting data for the Royal Bank of Canada last summer found that more than 75 per cent of the bank's employees in southern Vancouver Island commute to work longer than appears necessary. For more than half of the staff, at least one other person is doing the same job at a different branch and could potentially swap locations for mutual benefit – not to mention the benefit to RBC and society in general – at no cost to the employer.

CloseCommute's vision is to save commuters billions of hours a year worldwide; increase productivity and reduce absenteeism; cut traffic congestion and greenhouse gas emissions, and generally make the world a better place to live and work. Batchelor predicts Metro Vancouver and Victoria could see five to 10 per cent less traffic within two years if and when major employers adopt these practices — and he has the research to back up his calculations.

Batchelor and Todd Litman, executive director of the Victoria Transportation Policy Institute, have assembled an extensive annotated bibliography of peer-reviewed studies that link long work commutes to a wide range of negative effects. Longer commutes are linked to increased worker stress and depression; chronic fatigue; accidents and illness; obesity and diabetes; job dissatisfaction and reduced productivity; marital breakdown and higher absenteeism. Long commutes also contribute to greenhouse gas emissions and to traffic congestion, which government economists calculate is slowing B.C.'s economic activity by billions of dollars annually.

CloseCommute commissioned datasets from Statistics Canada about teaching professionals and their commutes. The data reveal that fewer than one in six of those working in Metro Vancouver works at a school close to their home. Batchelor's team calculates voluntary job exchanges among peers would save the region's teachers more than one million hours of needless commuting annually – and could remove as many as 5,000 vehicles from the roads. Using a standard transportation metric, the reduction of vehicles from the education sector alone would boost B.C.'s economy by more than \$50 million per year.

The B.C. Teachers' Federation has supported what it calls "green lateral exchange/transfers" since 2007, but to date the province's Ministry of Education has been silent on the opportunity to reduce teachers' commutes even though it spends over \$150 million per year on absenteeism. Batchelor speculates that, with a provincial election looming, Education Minister Mike Bernier could make a long-awaited announcement about supporting exchange/transfers to reduce school districts' costs for absenteeism and extended healthcare and (with less stressed and healthier teachers) improve learning outcomes. "Who would vote against that?" says Batchelor.

"CloseCommute represents a rare opportunity for HR professionals to really shine within their organizations," says Dr. Tom Rippon, an instructor in the human resources degree program at Victoria's Camosun College. "They can present a solid business case to the chief executive that updating their policies to reduce employee commuting will trigger higher productivity and lower HR expenses with no downside risk."

Batchelor is confident the CloseCommute approach will be widely adopted. "The timing is right and everyone wins – the employer, commuters, their families, communities, the economy, the planet," he says. "People will be saving hundreds of hours per year. I do wonder what they will do with their new free time."

On March 7, CloseCommute launches a free web app for long commuters to identify work opportunities closer to home, as well as a comprehensive toolkit for employers. The initial rollout is to Metro Vancouver and Greater Victoria. The initiative will expand to Toronto within a few months, followed by Seattle and other cities.

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