

Flex in the City: The Story of a Mayor and His Vision

By Webb Lyons

What do an active concern for the environment, a vision for a high quality of life, and a desire to reduce traffic congestion have in common? They all lead to greater workplace flexibility, at least under Houston Mayor Bill White's recent initiative. For Houstonians, when getting from here to there can take too much time, mobility is a critical feature of one's quality of life. So, in 2003, when White was running for Mayor, he made mobility a key feature of his campaign; now, in 2006, after successfully moving forward the first four points of his mobility plan, Mayor White and his staff are focusing on the fifth and final point – encouraging top executives to adopt flexible, productive, dynamic workplaces,

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a practice that not only increases mobility by reducing traffic congestion, but also gives employees more control over their workday.

Certainly, other places around the country have understood the connection between problems on the roadways and work schedules, and have thus attempted to reduce traffic congestion through a number of means, one of which is workplace flexibility (see sidebar). Similarly, the Federal Government often offers its employees alternative work schedules, recognizing that they can help employees in "avoiding peak rush hour traffic."¹ Yet, this initiative in Houston appears special because of its leadership, a Mayor who has made mobility one of his top priorities, demonstrating the political will necessary to make workplace flexibility high on the agenda of employers.

Perhaps there is no better illustration of the Mayor's

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State Legislation. Providing workers with workplace schedule options can help workers meet responsibilities at home and at the same time can help address the hazards of both air pollution and traffic congestion. In 2005-2006, state legislators in Hawaii and New Jersey introduced bills which encouraged flexible work options as a means to reduce traffic congestion. Both states are attempting to provide alternative work and telecommuting options for all state employees², while legislators in Hawaii have also introduced a bill that would enact a "transportation demand management program requiring public and private employers to institute traffic reduction measures involving employees."³ Similarly, these same states, along with California, Washington, and North Carolina, introduced bills to reduce congestion through promoting telework options. Furthermore, a number of states have passed statutes that identify and define workplace flexibility as a way of reducing traffic congestion.⁴

EPA. In addition to state legislation, the Environmental Protection Agency, concerned with reducing pollution, works with a number of businesses to increase workplace flexibility. Through their Best Workplaces for Commuters Program, a voluntary business-government partnership, the EPA recognizes and offers assistance to businesses that support commuters in a number of ways, including compressed work days and telework options.⁵

commitment to this innovative workplace flexibility than the story of its creation. In June 2005, he developed a Steering Committee made up of human resource professionals and traffic engineers, with Kathleen Kelley, Director of the Flexible Workplace Program, coming on board in September. From the beginning, Mayor White was dedicated to the idea that this initiative must be business-friendly, and, as a result, Kelley's initial focus was to schedule a luncheon meeting with the Mayor and ten to fifteen of the city's top CEOs. The purpose of the working lunch was to hear the CEOs concerns and receive their input about the initiative. The meeting was scheduled for Tuesday, September 27th; however, on Wednesday, September 21st, six days before he was to gather with the CEOs, Mayor White had to make a much more pressing announcement – an order to evacuate the city. Hurricane Rita, a Category 5 hurricane, made landfall over the weekend, on Saturday the 24th. When Kelley returned to the office the following Monday to a city that was still officially closed, she called Mayor

White, certain that the upcoming luncheon with the business leaders would be postponed. Yet, to her surprise, the Mayor, the same Mayor who had worked continuously for several days trying to ensure that the people of Houston could evacuate safely, wanted to go ahead with the scheduled meeting, determined to keep mobility an important priority.

The result was a productive working lunch where Mayor White and eleven CEOs from banks, waste management companies, energy firms, and other area businesses formulated a plan to move the flexible workplace initiative forward. First, they reached a consensus that this plan must be driven by top executives of organizations, that it must be supportive of businesses and entirely voluntary. Second, the group decided that mobility had been framed incorrectly in the past; rather than focusing exclusively on *how* employees get to work, the question should also include *whether* employees need to get to work, and, if they do, if it is critical that they work traditional hours.

Within five months, the meeting with eleven CEOs mushroomed into a standing-

room only Workplace Flexibility Summit in February of 2006. At the Summit, over 100 business leaders from seventy different companies shared with one another, discussing such topics as how to get clients and customers on board with workplace flexibility, driving this initiative from the top, and the concept of the virtual manager, a manager that does not necessarily need to be in the same office as the employees to effectively manage. From the beginning, thirty Houston companies, ranging from five employees to 3,000 employees, signed on to the initiative, pledging to add more flexibility to their working environment.

Thus far, flexible work options have been taken up mostly by lower-level workers, particularly those who embrace the idea of compressed workweeks and more control over their time. Higher-level workers appear more reluctant to change their schedules. After all, many of these workers have moved up the corporate ladder by putting in long hours every work day. As Kelley notes, this segmentation of workers, where one group embraces flexible work and another group rejects it, presents a number of challenges for the initiative, including a fundamental need to change work



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<http://www.clasp.org/audio/mayorwhiteinterview.m3u>

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culture attitudes. Now, a concerted effort is underway to change the overall perception about what constitutes a good worker. Kelley says, “It isn’t about face time anymore – it’s about productivity and getting the job done.” Mayor White, a former CEO and a firm “reformed” believer that work does not necessarily have to take place at work, realizes that, unless flexible work can also increase productivity, the initiative will not be successful in the business community. As a result, the Mayor primarily communicates CEO to CEO and relies on employers who have successfully undertaken workplace flexibility to sell it to other employers.

Recently the Mayor’s Office received encouraging evidence that workplace flexibility can succeed in accomplishing its goal of increased mobility. The city conducted a study to measure the effects on travel time of employees of Duke Energy Co., which partnered with the Mayor’s office by offering a flexible work option where employees could choose to work longer hours in exchange for being off every other Friday. Duke Energy offered this flexible work option to 400 employees, of which 260 participated. Mobility was improved in two important ways: first, there were fewer cars on the road on

Fridays, and, second, there were fewer cars on the road at peak times the rest of the week since workers were working 9 hour days Monday-Thursday. The study found that because of workplace flexibility every driver with an approximately 16-minute drive to work saved an average of 1.08 minutes on their commute, translating into 9 added hours into their life a year. Initially, 1.08 minutes might sound small, but considering there were 6,200 cars traveling on the roadways leading into Duke Energy at every peak hour, the effects that workplace flexibility had on mobility are certainly significant. In fact, the study concluded that this increased mobility would result in a total annual savings of over \$1 million, as all drivers and passengers using these roadways could decrease their fuel costs and increase their productivity through time saved.

With optimism grounded in this initial study and the backing of several supportive businesses, the Mayor’s office is now focusing much of its attention on the biggest workplace flexibility event to date – “Flex in the City.” From September 18-29, 2006, Mayor White is encouraging employers from all around the Houston area to participate in “Flex in the City” by adding different flexibility options for

their employees that eliminate at least one peak time drive during the two week period. These options include compressed workweeks, flexible start and end times, and telework. During these two weeks, the City of Houston can evaluate changes in mobility, and employers can measure the effect on productivity. The City will offer businesses tools that will not only help them measure productivity, but also assist them in identifying those positions that are best suited for workplace flexibility. Mayor White, Kathleen Kelley, the Steering Committee, and supportive businesses are working hard to ensure that this event is a success; if the first nine months of the initiative are any indication, it seems safe to assume that it will be.

Looking long-term, what is the goal of the Mayor’s workplace flexibility initiative? As Kelley said, nothing less than to “have Houston lead the way in workplace flexibility, have more productive workplaces, to attract workers, and increase quality of life through achieving a significant improvement on the freeways.” The goals are ambitious, but with improved mobility on the road and at work, Houston is well on its way.

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ABOUT CLASP

The Center for Law and Social Policy (CLASP), a national nonprofit organization founded in 1968, conducts research, legal and policy analysis, technical assistance, and advocacy related to

economic security for low-income families with children.

CLASP studies and addresses the impact of family friendly policies, such as sick leave and parental leave, on both workers and businesses.

While family friendly

policies are important for all parents, CLASP focuses particularly on low-wage working parents whose jobs generally provide less flexibility and time off to meet the needs for family time and family caring.

Endnotes

- 1 Office of Personnel Management. (2006). "Alternative Work Schedules." Washington, D.C. Available at http://www.opm.gov/employment_and_benefits/worklife/workplace-flexibilities/aws/index.asp
- 2 Sloan Work and Family Research Network. (2006). "Work Family Bills & Statutes." Chestnut Hill, MA: Boston College. Available at http://wfnetwork.bc.edu/bills.php?search_text=traffic&area=policy
- 3 Hawaii State Legislature. (2006). "Bill Status: SB 1019." Available at <http://www.capitol.hawaii.gov/site1/docs/getstatus2.asp?billno=SB1019>
- 4 Sloan Work and Family Research Network. (2006). "Work Family Bills & Statutes." Chestnut Hill, MA: Boston College. Available at http://wfnetwork.bc.edu/bills.php?search_text=traffic&area=policy. More information on these and other workplace flexibility initiatives can be found at <http://wfnetwork.bc.edu>, the website for the Sloan Work and Family Research Network.
- 5 U.S. Environmental Protection Agency and U.S. Department of Transportation. (2006). "Best Workplaces for Commuters." Washington, D.C. Available at <http://www.bwc.gov/about/index.htm>. More details about Best Workplaces for Commuters, including a number of facts and figures relating to workplace flexibility, are available from the website.