

Northwest Michigan

Getting to Work:

A Resource Guide for Employers and Commuters



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2016



FRAMEWORK
FOR OUR FUTURE

A REGIONAL PROSPERITY PLAN
FOR NORTHWEST LOWER MICHIGAN

networksnorthwest.org/framework

The Framework for Our Future includes a wealth of information and tools that all parts of the community—including the public, community leaders, businesses, nonprofits, public agencies, and statewide stakeholders – can use as they work to address these issues in ways that also support regional goals. Data and information will help communities supplement their local deliberation, planning, and decision-making processes.

Resources include:

- Samples of master plan language used in other parts of the region that communities can consider when updating their own plans and ordinances;
- New studies and research that will aid in decision-making;
- Goals, strategies, and actions that are provided as a set of tools and best practice that stakeholders can choose to use if they desire.

The information included in the Framework is intended to serve as a compilation of best practices to help guide local decision-makers and community organizations who would like to address the issues identified in the Framework.

For complete reports and accompanying resources for each topic, including background reports and data, please visit:

Networksnorthwest.org/rpi

Introduction

Increasingly, commuters are realizing the many benefits that can be enjoyed by choosing smart commute options, over driving single occupancy cars to and from work. These benefits include individual financial savings; individual time savings, improved air quality, conservation of non-renewable resources, increased employer productivity and oftentimes improved quality of life.

Smart commute options are often referred to as Rideshare Programs or Alternative Transportation; these programs can take many forms, such as:

- Public Transit
- Vanpooling
- Carpooling
- Taxicabs
- Transportation network companies (TNC) such as Uber, or Lyft
- Bicycling
- Walking

Throughout this guidebook we will refer to these forms of transportation collectively as smart commuting.

The increased use of smart commute options offers many positive effects, not only for individuals but also for our communities, economies and the environment. No matter which smart commute option an individual chooses, these options result in increased savings associated with vehicle maintenance, depreciation, parking costs and fuel consumption.

In addition, smart commuting reduces congestion, particularly in densely populated commercial and residential areas with lots of large employers. With less congestion due to smart commuting, downtown parking spaces are freed up for potentially valuable productive real estate, greenspace, plazas or squares that would engender a sense of place to the community and improve its walkability, economic vitality, and quality of life for everyone.

In the sections below, this commuter guide will outline, the benefits of smart commuting and identify several existing Federal, State, and Local programs. Finally this commuter guide concludes, with a guide to action for three potential end users: Employers, Employees, and Processors/Human Resource staff who, more than likely, will be administering their smart commute programs for their respective organizations on a day to day basis.



Why Smart Commuting?

1. Smart commuting can save you money!

Traditionally, housing has been considered to be “affordable” if it costs 30% or less of a household’s income. New benchmarks for affordability suggest that households should pay no more than 45% of their total income on the combined costs of housing and transportation.¹

Therefore, one way to improve quality of life is to reduce either housing costs, transportation costs, or both. The following section explores several ways to reduce transportation costs in order to bring individuals’ or families’ housing and transportation affordability indexes in line with the 45% benchmark.

In order to highlight the savings that results from smart commuting, it is helpful to first understand the costs of owning and operating a vehicle. The cost of driving is often higher than one might think. In fact, when one takes into account the comprehensive costs of owning and operating a vehicle the results are often surprising.

For example, in its 2015 study entitled “Your Driving Costs” the American Automobile Association (AAA) finds that the annual cost of owning and operating an “average sedan” comes to \$8,698 per year. ²Furthermore, the average cost per mile comes to 58 cents. Just imagine for a moment having to put 58 cents into your car every mile in order to keep it running!

Below is a list of common vehicle ownership and operating costs:

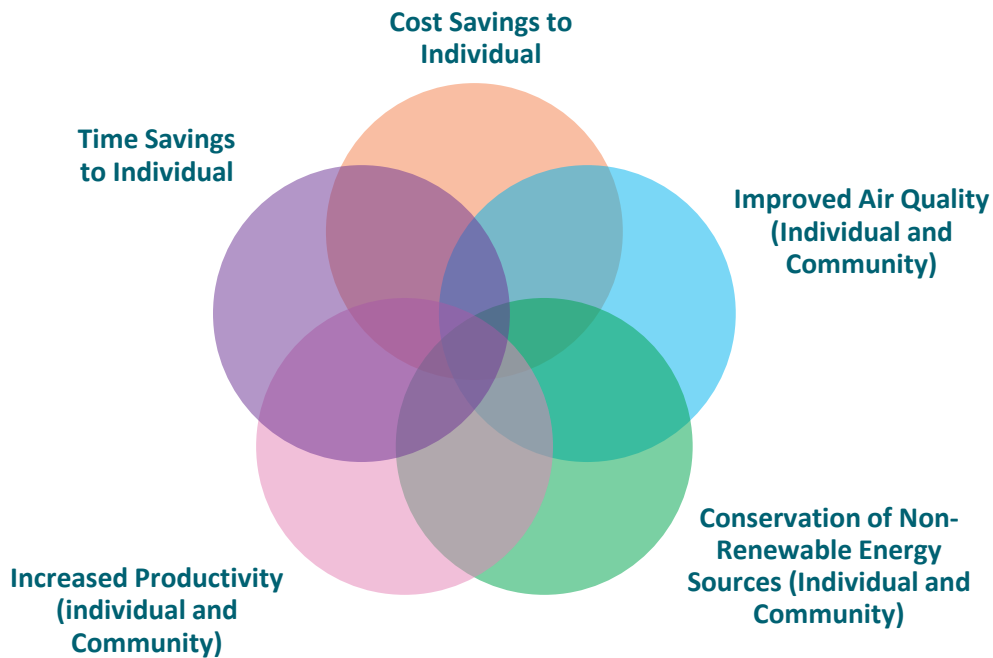
- Initial Purchase Price
- Automobile Loan Payments
- Auto Insurance
- License and Registration
- Basic Maintenance
- Fuel
- Depreciation



¹Framework for Our Future, A Regional Prosperity Plan for Northwest Lower Michigan

²American Automobile Association (AAA), 2015 Your Driving Costs

Smart Commuting Benefits



Another transportation cost that is often not factored in is the additional cost of parking. According to the American Public Transportation Association's 2012 *Transit Savings Report*,³ the national average for a monthly unreserved parking space in a downtown business district is \$166 per month, or \$1,995 annually.

When this is added to AAA's estimated average annual cost of owning and operating a vehicle of \$8,698, we find that the figure for commuters can top out at as high as \$10,693 annually! While, nationally this level of transportation cost might be in line with 45% of a household's income, locally it likely constitutes a higher percentage.

In fact within the 10 county Northwestern southern Michigan region, 76,926 workers combine for 2,464,840 total daily commute miles, and 640,858,436 Total Annual miles. Combined, the annual cost of commuting comes to

\$358,880,722.⁴ Put another way; each of the 76,923 workers pays \$4,665 per year in commuting expenses. That's over \$388 per month and that is only commuting costs alone.

While it is difficult to estimate exact savings figures, given varying fuel prices in different areas, differing population densities, individual choices, commute times and the variety of smart commute options available, generally savings are realized in the following cost categories: Vehicle Maintenance, Fuel Consumption and Depreciation.

Estimates show that compared to long distance, drive alone costs, vanpooling and/or carpooling will save on average 50-75%. Applied to the estimates of vehicle costs from AAA above, this results in potential savings of \$5,346 (50%) and \$8,020 respectively (75%). Furthermore, the South Florida Commuter Services, part of The South Florida Commuter Assistance Program, founded by the Florida Department of

³ American Transportation Association, 2012 *Transit Savings Report*

⁴ US Census Longitudinal Employer-Household Dynamics Origin-Destination Employment Statistics (LODES) Version 7.2; Google Maps Distance Matrix API

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Transportation (FDOT) to serve as a public information office, estimates that the average carpooler can save as much as \$600 each month on the cost of their commuting drive, or \$7,200 annually.⁵

2. Smart commuting can help to improve air quality!

According to 2008 EPA estimates, passenger cars and light trucks accounted for 22 percent of total hydrocarbon emissions, 50 percent of the nation's carbon monoxide (CO) emissions, 32 percent of the total nitrogen oxide (NOx) emissions and 18 percent of nationwide greenhouse gas emissions.⁶

Smart commute options help to reduce the number of vehicles on the road, and subsequently reduces vehicle miles traveled which in turn results in a reduction of hydrocarbon emissions, carbon monoxide emissions, nitrogen oxide emissions and other greenhouse gas emissions.

The South Florida Commuter Services notes that by carpooling just twice a week, 1,600 pounds of greenhouse gases can be kept out of the air each year.⁷ Furthermore, if 100 people were to take advantage of carpool options every day, more than 1,320 pounds of carbon monoxide and 2,376,000 pounds of carbon dioxide could be removed from the air.

And lastly, according to the World Health Organization, lower levels of air pollution not only results in cleaner environment, it also contributes to better health as many chronic diseases and conditions are linked to air quality such as stroke, heart disease, lung cancer, and both chronic and acute respiratory diseases including asthma.⁸



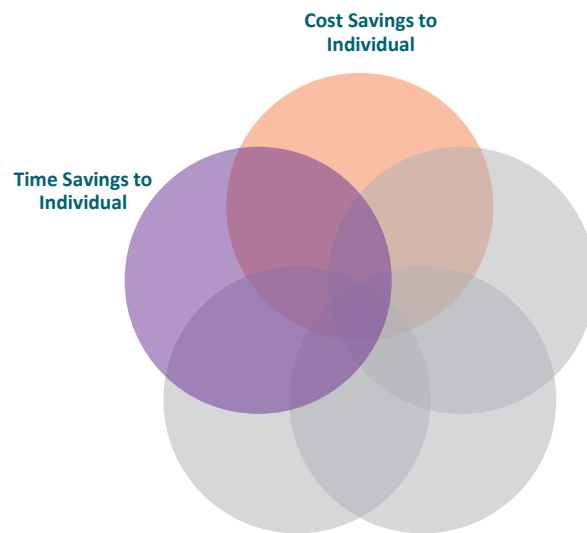
⁵ South Florida Commuter Assistance Program, <http://www.1800234ride.com/13-fun-facts-about-carpoolin>

⁶ US Environmental Protection Agency (EPA), <https://www3.epa.gov/>

⁷ South Florida Commuter Assistance Program, <http://www.1800234ride.com/13-fun-facts-about-carpoolin>

⁸ World Health Organization, <http://www.who.int/mediacentre/factsheets/fs313/en/>

Individual Benefits



3. Smart commuting options conserve non-renewable energy resources.

According to Department of Energy (DOE) estimates for 2008, 70 percent of the oil used in the US is used by the transportation sector and roughly forty-four percent was consumed by passenger cars and light trucks. In 2009, 51 percent of the oil used in the US was imported, down from 58 percent in 2007.⁹ With more, higher mileage models available in the market, Americans have been purchasing more fuel-efficient vehicles over the last several years, as the average fuel economy of new passenger cars has increased from 20.9 to 25.1 miles per gallon.

According to US 2008 Department of Transportation DOT and Federal Highway Administration (FHA) Highway Statistics, the average mileage of passenger cars on the roads in 2008 was 22.4 miles per gallon while the average mileage for light

trucks was 18.1 miles per gallon.¹⁰ Assuming a 50-mile round trip commute, two people ridesharing five days per week, 45 weeks per year would save 502 gallons of gas if the vehicle taken off the road was a passenger car, and 621 gallons would be conserved if the vehicle removed from the road was a light truck.

4. Smart commuting might save you some time!

How many times have you heard someone say ‘there just aren’t enough hours in a day’? Well, for smart commuters, there can be! According to Citi’s *“ThankYou Premier Commuter Index”*,¹¹ workers spend 200 hours annually on their daily commute with an average daily commute time of 45 minutes nationally. Locally the average daily commute is 32 miles and 41 minutes.

⁹ Department of Energy, <http://www.energy.gov/>

¹⁰ US Department of Transportation, Federal Highway Administration (FHA), <http://www.fhwa.dot.gov/>

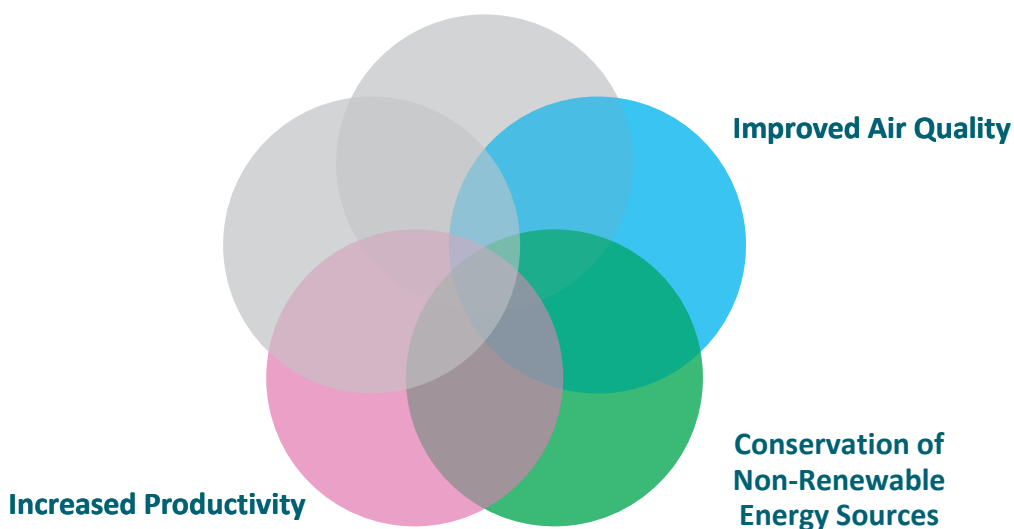
¹¹ Citi’s *Thank You Premier Commuter Index*

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What this means, is that for individuals who smart commute, the ride home represents time when they are freed up to be on mobile devices, text, send e-mails make phone calls, read newspapers, or books, which in many cases creates additional free time to relax and spend time with family

and friends after work. Additionally, for individuals whose commute involves heavy traffic, the use of public transit, vanpooling, or carpooling, may provide the opportunity to use High Occupancy Vehicle (HOV) lanes on expressways saving you even more time.

Community and Individual Benefits



5. Smart commuting increases employee productivity.

If an employee were to make the transition from single occupancy vehicle commuting to carpooling, vanpooling or transit, they would find that they would be freed up to engage in activities such as sending texts or e-mails from mobile devices, that otherwise would have had to wait until they

arrived at work. Or if individual employees were able to use their commute time to utilize social media they may be less likely to access social media at work, making them more productive while at work.

Furthermore smart commuters often are not subject to the daily traffic grind, which means they arrive at work happier, more relaxed and, in turn, more productive. And finally,

vanpoolers are found to be more punctual than those that drive alone because they know that their co-vanpoolers or carpoolers will be waiting for them. So, oftentimes smart commuting employees are more likely to arrive to work on time.

While there is no single strategy that will solve the complex problems facing the transportation issues in our communities and across the nation, one thing is clear; reducing single occupancy vehicle trips and vehicle miles traveled is a win-win benefiting the economy, the environment, the community and the individual.

Having identified, the issues that arise from single occupancy vehicle use such as congestion and pollution, as well as the benefits of smart commuting like cost savings, time savings and reduction of emissions, one might be compelled to identify existing programs in order to begin taking advantage of the benefits that result from smart commuting.

The next section of this commuter guidebook will identify commuter benefits programs that currently exist through Federal Programs, State programs and even several local programs and options as well.



What Programs exist?

This section is intended to act as resources for employers who are wondering what commuter benefits programs exist and which commuter benefits program might be the best fit for their organization. It is also intended for employees who are seeking smart commute options. This section outlines several programs ranging from Federal, State-and-local programs as well as private programs. Additionally, this section outlines a wide range of types of programs from Public Transit, to parking space cost reimbursement.

This commuter guide is not intended to be exhaustive and reflects only the known programs as of the date of publication. Furthermore, this section, and this commuter guide as a whole are intended to be a starting point, providing a broad range of options for both employers and employees.

1. Qualified Federal tax-free benefits.

Section 132 (f) of the Internal Revenue Code allows employers to provide tax-free benefits to employees related to transit, vanpools, parking, and bike-to-work programs; these Qualified Transportation Fringe Benefits are commonly referred to as commuter benefits. Businesses may deduct the administrative cost of these employer-paid benefits from their gross income for purposes of taxation. Both the employer and employee save on taxes since they do not pay federal income or payroll taxes on these benefits.

In short, employers save on payroll related taxes and employees save on federal income taxes.

Under the tax code, employers may offer these Qualified Transportation Fringe Benefits in one of six ways

- Subsidize an employee up to \$255 per month for transit and commuter high-way vehicles (e.g., vanpool).
- Subsidize an employee up to \$255 per month for parking.
- Allow an employee to reduce his or her income on a pre-tax basis to cover the costs of transit and vanpools up to \$255 per month.
- Allow an employee to reduce his or her income on a pre-tax basis to cover the costs of transit and vanpools up to \$255 per month.
- Share the costs of the benefit with the employee; under current law, transit and vanpool expenses up to \$255 per month and/or qualified parking expenses up to \$255 per month are tax-free.
- Reimburse an employee up to \$20 per month (\$240 per year) for eligible expenses incurred for bicycling to work on a regular basis.

The table below illustrates the different options that employers can offer to employees regarding qualified transportation fringe benefits. Note, that there are exceptions (e.g., partners, 2% owners in S-corps) so both employers and employees should check with your tax advisers to ensure compliance.

Table 1: Qualified Transportation Fringe Benefits

	Transit	Vanpool	Qualified Parking	Qualified Bicycle Commuting
Incentive Levels	Employees receive up to \$255 per month for transit expenses.	Employees receive up to \$255 per month for vanpool expenses.	Employees receive up to \$255 per month for parking at or near employer's worksite or at a facility from which employee commutes via transit, vanpool or carpool.	Up to \$20 per qualified bicycle commuting month. This exclusion for qualified bicycle commuting reimbursement includes any employer reimbursement during the 15-month period beginning with the first day of the calendar year for reasonable expenses incurred by the employee during the calendar year.
Employer Tax Benefits	<p>Employers give their employees up to \$255/month*** to commute via transit; gets a tax deduction and saves over providing same value in gross income. OR</p> <p>Employers may allow employees to use pre-tax income to pay for transit, vanpool, and/or parking. Employers save on payroll tax (at least 7.65% savings). OR</p> <p>A combination of both up to statutory limits.</p>			Employers reimburse their employees up to \$20/month for qualified bicycle commuting; gets a tax deduction and saves over providing same value in gross income According to the IRS, "Generally, you can exclude qualified transportation fringe benefits from an employee's wages even if you provide them in place of pay. However, qualified bicycle commuting reimbursements do not qualify for this exclusion."
Incentive Levels	Employees receive up to \$255 per month tax-free for transit or vanpool (not included in W-2). OR	Employees receive up to \$255 per month tax-free (not included on W-2). OR		Employee reimbursed up to \$20 per month for reasonable expenses related to commuting by bicycle.
Employees pay for commute benefit with pre-tax income and save on income tax. OR				
Combination of both up to statutory limits				

Source: <http://www.nctr.usf.edu/programs/clearinghouse/commutebenefits/>

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In short, what these tax benefits do for the employee is cover the cost of transit, vanpooling, parking or bicycling, which enables them to realize a savings by not consuming as much fuel, not depreciating their vehicle as quickly, and by enabling employees to save by reducing the need for maintaining their personal vehicles as much. Conversely, what these tax benefits do for the employer is to reduce the cost of payroll, which in-turn reduces the amount the organizations must pay out in payroll taxes.

2. State programs MichiVan, Vanpooling

MichiVan is sponsored by the Michigan Department of Transportation and operated by vRide, Inc. and Enterprise Rideshare; supplies fully insured passenger vans to commuter groups. Under this program, 7-15 commuters pay a monthly fee as low as \$66.78 per month (based on one way mileage and van size), along an established route. MichiVan operators provide the vehicle and picks up the tab on maintenance, insurance, titling, licensing and repairs. One person volunteers to be the primary driver of the van; by doing so this person's monthly fee is waived and they ride for free!¹²

A vanpool usually meets at a centralized location, such as a shopping mall, grocery store or carpool lot. Additionally, a free emergency ride home service for unexpected occurrences such as overtime, a family emergency or illness or injury in the work place is provided. The vanpool program is open to individual members of the public. MDOT also assists employers develop vanpools and ridesharing programs for their employees.¹³

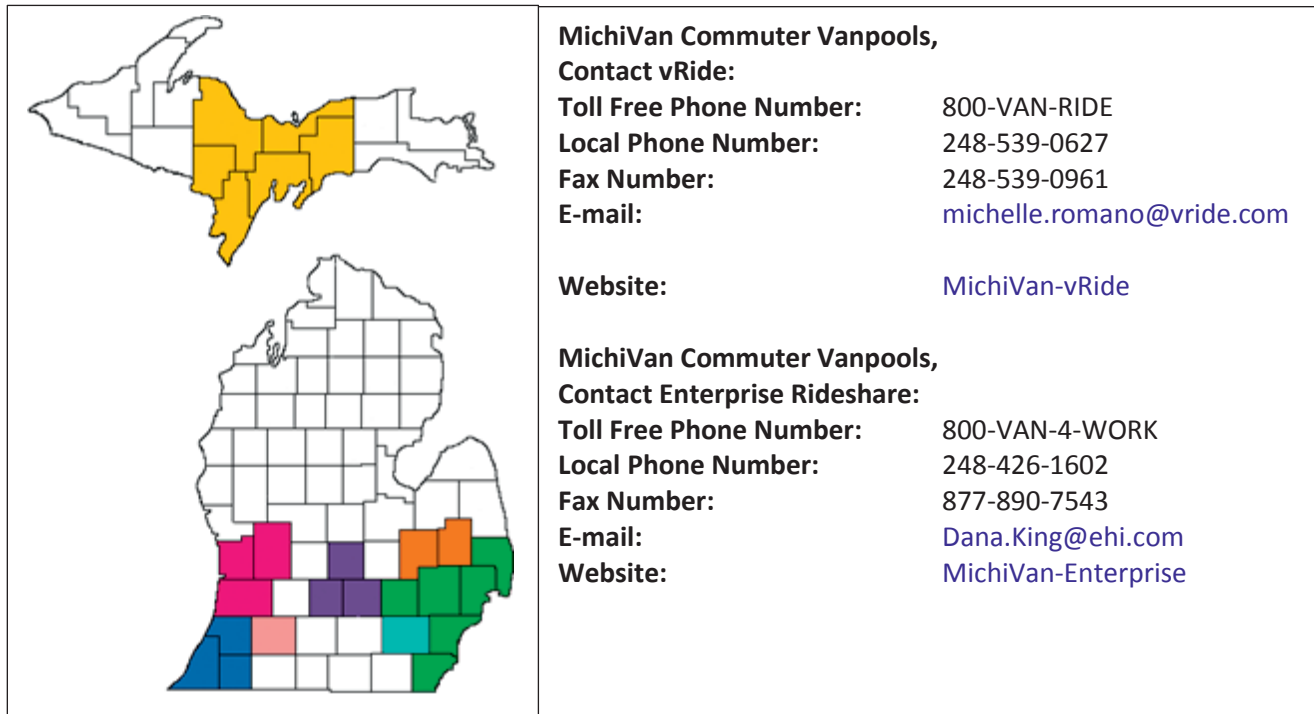
Figure 2, below identifies the existing MichiVan Rideshare programs and provides the contact information for individuals or employers interested in starting a vanpool or seeking more information about existing MichiVan programs. Currently there are no MichiVan Rideshare Programs in Northwest Michigan. Counties shown in white are not currently served by a Local Rideshare Office, but do offer MichiVan service for groups of five or more.



¹² MichiVan Vanpooling, <http://www.vpsiinc.com/Home/index.asp?OID=27,8>.

¹³ Ibid.

Figure 2, MichiVan Commuter Vanpools



Source: MichiVan Vanpooling, <http://www.vpsiinc.com/Home/index.asp?OID=27>

MDOT Carpool Lots –

The Michigan Carpool Parking Lot Program sometimes referred to as Park and Ride began as a pilot program in 1974 with 11 carpool parking lots. Today there are 235 carpool parking lots located across the state providing nearly 9,000 parking spaces. Approximately 3,900 vehicles park in these facilities on an average weekday. The program continues to grow as new lots are constructed and existing lots are improved.¹⁴

Of the 235 carpool parking lots, 11 are located in Northwest Michigan. The table below lists each parking lot and relevant information.



¹⁴ MDOT, Carpool Lots, http://www.michigan.gov/mdot/0,4616,7-151-9615_11228_11234---,00.html

Table 2: MDOT Carpool Parking Lots Located in Northwest Michigan

County	Primary Route	Local Route	Exit Number	Capacity	Surface Type	Entrance Sign?	Lighting?	Address
Emmet	US -31	West Edgar Street	310	17	Paved	No	Yes	210 Stimpson St. Pellston, MI 49769
Description	From northbound US-31 in Pellston lot is on left/west side of road just past Edgar Street. From southbound US-31 in Pellston lot is on right/west side of road just past State Street.							
Emmet	US-31	M-68	—	20	Paved	Yes	Nearby	7260 Burr Ave Alanson, MI 49706
Description	From northbound US-31 lot is located on left/west side of road north of M-68 intersection in Alanson. From southbound US-31 in Alanson lot is on right/west side of road just before M-68 intersection. From westbound M-68 turn north onto US-31 at Alanson. Lot is on left/west.							
Leelanau	Broadway	Lincoln Street	—	10	Gravel	No	Nearby	112 Lincoln Ave Suttons Bay MI 49682
Description	From northbound M-22 (from Traverse City) in Suttons Bay turn left/west onto Broadway. Lot is on right/north just past Lincoln 2 blocks west of M-22. From southbound M-22 (from Northport) in Suttons Bay turn right/west onto Broadway (south of business district). Lot is on right/north just past Lincoln 2 blocks west of M-22.							
Antrim	US-31	Fourth Street	—	40	Paved	Yes	Nearby	1st St. Elk Rapids, MI 49629
Description	From northbound US-31 turn right/east onto Fourth Street in Elk Rapids. Lot is on left/north. From southbound US-31 turn left/east onto Fourth Street in Elk Rapids. Lot is on left/north.							
Leelanau	M-72	County Rd. 667	—	37	Paved	Yes	No	465 E. Traverse City Hwy. Maple City, MI 49664
Description	From westbound M-72 lot is last right/ north before County Road 667 about 0.5 miles past Bright Road 10.5 miles west of M-22 intersection northwest of Traverse City. From eastbound M-72 lot is first left/ north past County Road 667 about 13 miles east of M-22 intersection in Empire.							
Grand Traverse	US-31	Yuba Park Rd.	—	16	Paved	No	Inspect Pending	9657 US-31 Williamsburg, MI 49690
Description	None Given							

Table 2: MDOT Carpool Parking Lots Located in Northwest Michigan

County	Primary Route	Local Route	Exit Number	Capacity	Surface Type	Entrance Sign?	Lighting?	Address
Grand Traverse	US -31	M-72	—	33	Gravel	No	No	3500 M-72 Williamsburg, MI 49690
Description	From westbound M-72 lot is located on right/north just before Masonic Temple at corner of M-72 and McDermott Street in Acme. From northbound US-31/eastbound M-72 turn right/east onto M-72 in Acme. Lot is second left/north past McDermott Street beside Masonic Temple. From southbound US-31 turn left/east onto M-72 in Acme. Lot is second left/north past McDermott Street beside Masonic Temple.							
Kalkaska	M-72	—	—	30	Paved	Yes	No	None Given
Description	From US-131 take M-72 west to West Kalkaska Rd. Turn left (south) lot is on the right. From US-31 take M-72 east to West Kalkaska Rd. Turn right (south) lot is on the right.							
Wexford	US-131	M-42/ US-131 BR	191	30	Paved	Yes	No	9875 No. 16 ½ Rd, Manton MI 49663
Description	From northbound US-131 turn right/west onto US-131BR. Lot is first right/north. From southbound US-131 turn left/east onto US-131BR Lot is first left/north.							
Wexford	US-131	Boon Rd.	—	28	Paved	Yes	Yes	9398 E. Boon Rd. Cadillac, MI 49601
Description	From northbound US - 131 turn right/east onto Boon Rd. in Cadillac. Lot is on right/south. From southbound US -131 turn left/east onto Boon Rd. in Cadillac. Lot is on right/south.							
Wexford	US-131	M-115	176	13	Paved	Yes	Nearby	E. 46 Mile Rd. Cadillac, MI 49601
Description	None Given							

Source: MDOT, Carpool Lots, http://www.michigan.gov/mdot/0,4616,7-151-9615_11228_11234---,00.html

3. Local programs NMRide.net

Northern Michigan Ride connects commuters for ride sharing to work, activities, and more throughout the Northwest Michigan region. NMRide.net is an easy way to reduce traffic, save energy, and make friends who value this smart commute option.¹⁵

In addition to connecting commuters, NMRide.net also provides tips, offers safety and etiquette information as well as links to and has information regarding public transit opportunities that exist throughout Northwest Lower Michigan.



Transit

Currently there are 9 public transit agencies in Northwest Lower Michigan that provide service on a set schedule as is shown in Table 3. The public transit agencies have formed a Directors Network that convenes regularly to share

information and to identify and implement collaborative projects that increase the efficiency and effectiveness of transit services across the region. Table 4 lists each of the public transit agencies and their websites that operate within Northwest Lower Michigan.¹⁶

Table 3, Communities in Northwest Lower Michigan Served by Public Transit

Communities in Northwest Lower Michigan Served by Public Transit				
Traverse City	Benzonia	Beulah	Honor	Lake Ann
Empire	Glen Arbor	Maple City	Cedar	Northport
Omena	Peshawbestown	Suttons Bay	Fife Lake	Kingsley
Kalkaska	Frankfort			

Table 4, Public Transit Agencies in Northwest Lower Michigan

Public Transit Agencies in Northwest Lower Michigan	
Antrim County Transportation	http://www.antrimcounty.org/act.asp
Bay Area Transportation Authority	http://www.bata.net/
Benzie Bus	http://www.benziebus.com/
Cadillac/Wexford Transit Authority	http://www.cwta.us/
Charlevoix County Transit	http://www.charlevoixcounty.org/transit.asp
Friendship Center of Emmet County	http://emmetcoa.org/services/transportation
Kalkaska Public Transit Authority	http://www.kalkaskatransit.com/
Manistee County Transportation	http://www.manisteecountytransportation.com/
Straits Regional Ride	http://www.cheboygancounty.net/straits-regional-ride-100/

¹⁵ NMRide.net, <http://www.networknorthwest.org/planning/transportation/northwest-michigan-ride-share-connection/>,11.

¹⁶ Ibid.

4. Employer Sanctioned Programs

Many local companies are offering incentives for employees who choose alternative transportation. Below are snapshots of these companies and the incentive programs they offer.

Grand Traverse Resort & Casino

The Grand Traverse Resort & Casino offers pre-purchased transit passes to employees at cost either by payroll deduction or cash. Additionally, the employee relations manager works with employees that have transportation barriers and explores transportation options with the employee including free transit passes, and working out a flexible schedule so that the employee can utilize public transit.

Hagerty

Hagerty has implemented a program that promotes healthy lifestyles by offering employees their choice of a Bicycle Benefit or a TC Parking Permit. Employees who use a bicycle as their regular means of transportation to and from work throughout the year may be reimbursed up to \$240/year for expenses associated with owning and maintaining a bicycle. With this option Hagerty is utilizing the Qualified Transportation Fringe Benefits allowed under Section 132 (f) of the Internal Revenue Code as is detailed in the preceding section of this guide.

As another option for employees, Hagerty pays approximately 75% of the annual cost of a parking pass and the employee covers the remainder. Many employees choose to supplement their parking pass with smart commuting. In addition to Hagerty's on-site gym for employees and their spouses, they also provide covered on-site outdoor bike racks and on-site shower facilities, including towels and toiletries. Offering smart commuting options such as the ones listed above is one way in which Hagerty's employees' personal health is supported.

Olson, Bzdok & Howard

Olson, Bzdok & Howard is a bike friendly office because of a few incentives that they offer to encourage their active living culture throughout the workplace. Olson, Bzdok & Howard provides employees \$20 each month for the employee that commutes by bike more than 50% of the time. Additionally, they offer bike bags or baskets for employees that use their bike to run office errands instead of driving. The company won a bike at a smart commute week event that they now maintain with a basket and a lock and provide to any employee to use during the day.

Lastly, they have a bike rack which was also won at smart commute week event, in the office courtyard that is available to employees and visitors.

Stormcloud Brewing Company

Stormcloud Brewing Company has also launched its employee commuter program, which involves a weekly drawing for a \$25 gift card for employees who smart commute to work.

Additionally, Stormcloud also developed a partnership with an area school to utilize a school parking lot as a smart commute lot for employees who do need to drive. The school lot is 3 blocks from the brewery, enabling employees to get a nice walk in before work, or use one of three company-owned bicycles to get to and from the brewery.

5. Other Smart Commuting Programs

TART's Smart Commute TC and Smart Commute Week

Smart Commute TC is a program that promotes the use of alternative forms of transportation. We collaborate with local businesses, governments and non-profit organizations to develop multi-modal infrastructure for active and healthy lifestyles. Collectively we strive to educate the community through workshops and special events and encourage smart commuting year round.

Smart Commute Week is an annual celebration held during the first full week of June. The week consists of events promoting cycling, walking, taking the bus and carpooling.

Free daily breakfasts are hosted at various locations around town for smart commuters. Every year community members challenge each other to a friendly competition known as the Smart Commute Challenge. Register your team and rack up points to win prizes with every smart commute trip you make.

Smart Commute Week is an annual celebration held during the first full week of June. The week consists of events promoting cycling, walking, taking the bus and carpooling.

Guide to Action – Employees

So you want your employer to develop a commuter benefits program. Below are a few practical steps that employees can take to assist employers in developing their commuter benefits program. While not insurmountable, the forethought and effort required to develop and manage a successful Commuter Benefits Program can be a restrictive barrier to many employers for very real reasons. Any productive assistance that employees can offer to help reduce or remove these restrictive barriers only increases the employer's chances of successfully developing and administering a commuter benefits program.

Become the in-house expert on available programs and the benefits to both employees, and employers.

One of the best ways that you, as an employee can influence your employer to entertain the idea of starting a commuter benefits program is by doing as much of the leg-work up front on your own. Research what programs would be available to your organization. Become well versed in, and be able to articulate to your superiors the tax benefits that such a commuter benefit program might have for the organization.

Help your employer make the case for starting the program, by recruiting other committed “would-be commuters” (recruit program participants in advance).

In order for a commuter benefit program to be financially feasible, it will need participants. Another great way that you can influence your employer to consider a commuter benefits program is by recruiting an army of co-workers to pre-commit to commuting a certain number of times per week for an extended period of time. This will help your employer better estimate not only its costs but also its tax benefits.

In many ways this is like RSVP'ing for an event; it enables the event host to have an idea of how many people will need to be accommodated and generally helps avoid surprises. By getting at least a core group of co-workers to pre-commit to participating in the potential commuter benefits program, you help promote it and raise awareness about the potential program which in-turn may lead to other co-workers joining in.

Offer to voluntarily head-up or assist in starting up the program.

One of the barriers to getting a successful commuter benefits program up and running are the costs associated with the initial and ongoing program administration. In order to assist in alleviating this burden, consider volunteering your time or asking your supervisor if you can spend a portion of your time at work developing or assisting in developing the potential commuter benefits program.

Personally, use alternative transportation for your daily commute, before, during and after the program is developed.

By using alternative transportation yourself, before the program is developed you help break down the mental barriers of your co-workers by showing that commuting via foot, bicycle, carpooling/vanpooling or public transit is a very real and doable possibility.

Guide to Action – Employers

So, you're considering providing your employees with a Commuter Benefits Program, BUT, you have several concerns. Several legitimate concerns. You're not sure what models of Commuter Benefits Programs exist. You're concerned about overburdening your Processing or HR Department staff with yet-another-program that will require administering. Is there enough interest amongst employees for such a program to be sustainable? Well, rest assured, you're asking ALL the right questions.

Below are several practical steps you can take as an employer and decision-maker to begin developing a successful, sustainable commuter benefit program that doesn't require additional staff or overburden current staffing capacity.

Consider the tax benefits to the organization.

Given the Federal tax benefits offered to companies with commuter benefits programs, you don't have to worry about the program eating away at your bottom line. In fact, by providing pre-tax dollars to employees, this reduces the organizations payroll expense and subsequent payroll taxes. The net effect is an increase to your bottom line.

Consider health, wellbeing, and productivity benefits to employees and organization.

In addition to bottom line benefits, a Commuter Benefits Program promotes better health and wellbeing amongst employees. Not only is this a great thing in and of itself, it means less sick days, less sick pay and increased productivity.

Consider social benefits to organization and community.

Furthermore, consider that developing a commuter benefits program could help your organization attract and retain more skilled employees. Employees are increasingly seeking jobs where the employer offers extra flexibility and additional benefits to fit their lifestyles. By providing this flexibility and additional benefits your organization could continue to build a reputation of being a top tier employer and a community leader.

Tap into momentum/energy of “in-house commuter experts/advocates”

With more and more employees seeking additional flexibility and benefits, there are often a core group of employees, or even just an individual who actively advocates for smart commuting, by either walking or biking to work regularly. Leverage these positive forces within your organization and put these individuals in a position to not only find success for themselves, but also to better the organization by assisting in developing a commuter benefits program.

Consider ways to provide Processing or HR staff additional resources.

By leveraging a core team of commuter advocates from within your organization, you might have the opportunity to structure these employees time and work plans so that they can assist processing or HR departments in developing and maintaining your organizations commuter benefits program.

Guide to Action – Processing or HR Staff

So, your employer wants you to start and manage a commuter benefits program. As a department manager, you're

concerned about overburdening your staff with yet another program that will require staff time and administration. Below are several steps you can take as staff in processing or HR to begin developing a successful, sustainable commuter benefits program that won't overburden your department's current staffing capacity. Lastly, understand that developing and administering a commuter benefits program is not necessarily a time intensive

Be clear about Processing or HR staff capacity to take on additional program. Talk about creative options.

Have a constructive conversation about what your departments needs would be in order to successfully develop and manage a commuter benefits program. Get specific. Ask for additional resources if need be; perhaps none are needed. Also, think creatively about other ways the program might be successful. Consider alternatives, or a scaled down or phased approach. Perhaps the program starts out small and grows into something larger.

Become the in-house expert on available programs and the benefits to both employees, and employers.

Be prepared. You and your staff do it every day; that's your specialty. Your department is hands on with every program in the organization. You know the details, and nuances of each program. This program is no different and you will serve both yourself and your organization well by becoming a student of new potential programs by learning the details inside and out.

Leverage, the in-house knowledge of co-workers who are rideshare and commuter benefits program advocates, and possibly try to utilize their expertise in starting and administering the program.

Utilize the demand for such a program within your organization by enlisting advocates for the program to assist in its development and management. Discuss this with other department heads and/or your superiors and try to find creative solutions to successfully deliver on the program.

Want to Learn More?

This Guidebook presents a variety of actions for employers, employees and human resources (HR) staff to consider in their endeavors to create a commuter benefits program that would provide smart commute options for employees. Smart commuting and commuter benefits programs are complex topics, and while there are some options for each of these groups (employers, employees, and HR staff), to “do it alone”, there is much more that can be accomplished by working together. Even if you want to do it alone, you are not alone in considering this issue. Please reach out to us. We can share and explore with you models and best practices, and connect you with local partners and programs that may be underway.

Networks Northwest’s Community Development Department works with local partners, both in the private and public sector, to ensure that the region’s workforce has access to affordable transportation options and affordable transportation alternatives. Some of our activities include:

- Communication and Outreach
- Technical assistance and resources to assist communities and organizations with transportation planning.
- Best practices research and analysis for communities.

For more information, or to obtain an electronic copy of this guidebook, please contact Tad Erickson at Networks Northwest at 231.929.5053, or via email at: taderickson@networksnorthwest.org



2,266
TOTAL PRIMARY ROAD MILES
IN NORTHWEST MICHIGAN



6,566
TOTAL LOCAL ROAD MILES
IN NORTHWEST MICHIGAN

3,114,178
VEHICLE MILES TRAVELED ANNUALLY
IN NORTHWEST MICHIGAN



Northwest Michigan

Getting to Work:

A Resource Guide for Employers and Commuters



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FOR NORTHWEST LOWER MICHIGAN

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