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How Broadband gets People out of their Cars.

Politicians and central planners love to tell us:

“If we want to reduce congestion we have to get people out of their cars and on to public transport.

We now have ample evidence that attempts to reduce congestion by boosting public transport are doomed to fail. From 1980 to 2000 the US increased its annual transit subsidies by 133%. The end result was a 26% loss in public transport work-trip market share.

Over the same period, solo-driving’s work-trip market share increased by 18%.

There is no doubt that getting people out of their cars during peak hours can reduce congestion. We notice this during school holidays, when many women take their holidays during school breaks so as to stay home and spend time with their children.

So the first part of the “solution” to congestion – getting people out of their cars – is a good idea. But the second part is now demonstrably wrong.

Curiously our backward looking transport planners overlook the one technology which actually does get people out of their cars during peak hours, which actually can reduce congestion, and which can provide all the benefits claimed for public transport.

This ideal alternative is called telecommuting, and it’s being driven by broadband – the higher the speed the better.¹

Since 1980, telecommuting is the only commute mode, other than single occupancy driving, which has increased market share right across America.

The figures are startling. In San Diego, Dallas and Phoenix, telecommuters outnumbered all transit commuters. In Oklahoma City telecommuters outnumbered all transit commuters by nearly five to one. In San Diego telecommuters outnumber light-rail commuters by 22 to 1 and in Denver by 47 to 1.

Broadband driven telecommuting requires no subsidies from ratepayers or taxpayers – and it works.

¹ See: The “*The Quiet Success: Telecommuting’s Impact on Transportation and Beyond*” by Ted Belaker, of the Reason Foundation, at www.reason.org/ps338.pdf

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Telecommuting delivers real benefits.

Public transport enthusiasts insist that public transport delivers a host of benefits but they simply don't eventuate. Massive investment in public transport has had no impact on fossil-fuel consumption, greenhouse gas emissions, accident rates, air pollution, and general quality of life.

On the other hand telecommuting delivers all of these benefits and more.

Telecommuting improves mobility, reduces air pollution, reduces accidents, reduces fossil-fuel consumption, increases "quality time" and leisure, and increases employment opportunities for the physically handicapped.

This same broadband-based connectivity, working in reverse, also improves access to health-care by allowing top quality doctors and specialists to operate from "virtually" anywhere. (New Zealand lags dreadfully here.)

Resolving the Career/Family Conflict

Many telecommuters have children living at home. In the long term this may deliver the most important benefit of all. In a recent *Opinion* piece in the *New Zealand Herald* a young woman, studying to be a lawyer, expressed concern that while she wanted to marry and have children the cost to her career would be massive because the time she would need to take off from work would set her back permanently.

The American experience is that young women can continue to pursue their professional careers by telecommuting – either full or part time. Many American companies now regard a period of proven telecommuting ability a big plus on a workers' CV.

After all, telecommuting saves the employer costs as well, and proven telecommuters can be a useful resource when tendering for joint venture projects within different markets and countries.

Chosing your Quality Time

Unions complain that workers are spending more and more time at work, and the quality of life, and of family life in particular, is suffering.

Certainly, spending two hours every day commuting in rush-hour traffic, fretting and fuming, and wasting time and money, hardly contributes to anyone's wellbeing. How many children go to school without lunch because their parents have had to get up so early "to beat the

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rush”? How many parents cannot afford school fees and books because of the money they spend on child-care and housekeeping services?

Unions campaign for extra annual leave while employers complain of the extra costs. Typical telecommuters in America are gaining about 15 eight-hour work days a year in actual extra time. These extra days come at no cost to the employer. Indeed studies find employers enjoy lower costs and increased productivity.

These savings are based on the measurable savings in commuting times. But telecommuters find other ways to save time – they shop at off-peak times and so enjoy easier parking and less time in check-out lines. They go to the gym when it suits rather than on their way to and from work when everyone else does.

They also save real money. The typical telecommuter in Southern California saves as much as US\$1,200 a year in petrol money alone. They also save on expensive wardrobes, restaurant meals, hairdressing, makeup, child-care, and house care.

A Quiet Revolution

Given all these gains in so many areas, why do the benefits of telecommuting go largely unnoticed?

The social engineers are more concerned with getting people into public transport than improving our lives. Politicians probably ignore telecommuters because they are dispersed, have no single voice, and are largely unaware of their own political power. Mainly, they don't identify themselves as telecommuters.

Even those who stand most to benefit from telecommuting, like the young woman studying for her law degree, seem unaware of the opportunity which telecommuting, supported by high speed broadband, can offer.

It's time they spoke out.

And it's time to move into the 21st Century.

Owen McShane