

Stimulate economy by getting out of your car

Changing commuting habits should be a part of Seattle's economic recovery plan, argues guest columnist Kate Joncas, president of the Downtown Seattle Association.

By Kate Joncas
Special to The Times



Just as our national leaders are unveiling strategies to pull the country out of the financial crisis, we in Seattle are looking for ways to strengthen the local economy. Changing our commute habits should be part of Seattle's economic recovery plan.

There is a direct connection between traffic congestion and the economic viability of downtown Seattle. Traffic congestion robs commuters and businesses of time and money and jeopardizes our ability to attract new companies and jobs. When it comes to how our commute habits affect our economic health, these are the facts: congestion costs Puget Sound residents and businesses between \$1.5 billion and \$2 billion each year, mostly in the form of lost time.

King County residents who drive to work alone waste nearly 48 hours a year stuck in traffic. The typical American household spends 18 percent of its income on driving costs — more than it spends on food. The average downtown Seattle commuter spends \$3,900 a year in parking and fuel costs alone. If the number of vehicles coming into downtown Seattle continues to increase at its current rate, we could need to build 20 additional 10-story parking garages in the next decade.

We could make a huge difference in downtown congestion and help our economy by changing our commute habits just one day a week. By sharing a ride, riding a bike, walking or hopping on a bus just one day a week we could relieve traffic congestion, avoid sacrificing our precious open space to new highways and parking garages, and reduce emissions that impact our environment. We could retain the qualities that make Seattle a wonderful place to live and a great place to do business. We could improve our health and save time and money.

Commute Seattle — an alliance of the Downtown Seattle Association, King County Metro and the City of Seattle, with additional financial support provided by Washington state — provides personal consultations to help downtown Seattle workers plan their commutes. They work with you to design a commute plan that makes sense and collectively can make a big impact on our downtown.

Nearly 1,000 downtown employers — including Mithun, Corbis, Unico, Pemco and the Downtown Seattle Association — offer commuter benefits such as free transit passes and free rides home if you have an emergency. If you register your carpool or vanpool, you can get premium parking through the City of Seattle or many downtown buildings. The Washington State Department of Transportation and King County Metro offer other incentives. Also, check out the Commute Seattle Web site, (www.commuteseattle.com) a one-stop shop for your commute needs.

Our new president is calling Americans to make changes to restore a vibrant and prosperous nation. By taking the pledge to share the commute just one day a week you are collectively contributing to a strong economy, environment, and a vibrant Downtown Seattle. We can take it one ride at a time.

Kate Joncas is the President of the Downtown Seattle Association and rides the bus to work.