CTR implementer interview
Thurston Regional Planning Council, Karen Parkhurst
Tuesday, September 5, 2017 9:00 AM
Interviewer: Susan Garber-Yonts

Tell us about your CTR/TDM program and your role in it.

We are the lead agency for CTR in Thurston County on behalf of the cities of Olympia, Lacey, and Tumwater and Thurston County. Olympia has the most affected worksites, and Thurston County has only one – The Evergreen State College. 95% of CTR worksites are public including state and local government agencies. In our region, all state agencies within the urban growth areas are affected, no matter the number of employees at that site. So, our 200+ employers include small as well as large worksites. Private employers consist primarily of the medical profession. While we have other large businesses in the Thurston region, most businesses don't meet the morning commute window due to shift work.

Our basic program includes quarterly ETC networking sessions, Basic Training at least twice a year, participation in Wheel Options, transit (i.e., Dump the Pump) and other promotions (i.e. Telework Week). We manage the survey and "annual" reporting processes, and provide support for worksite based and location based fairs and other events.

Partners include: Dept. of Transportation, Intercity Transit, Dept. of Enterprise Services, and the jurisdictions. We meet at least monthly to plan for events, meetings, promotions, and to strategize about best practices and initiatives. Depending on the issue and opportunity, we may also partner with health departments and facilities, chambers and un-affected businesses. For networking sessions, we bring in speakers of interest and subjects that we think are valuable.

We work with the jurisdictions (electeds and staff) to ensure that CTR/TDM is part of overall land use and transportation planning.

We routinely communicate with worksite ETCs and management, using newsletters, one-on-one meetings, emails and mailings, social media, and other means. This includes a post-networking session newsletter each quarter. We work with our partners to ensure that we are deliberate and clear in our communications, so that our worksites know who to follow up with. For example, Intercity Transit either tells us in advance about communications they plan to send, asks for inclusion in the newsletter, or cc's us. We truly try to ensure that there is "no wrong door" for our worksites.

We participate in WSRO, and other state and national organizations and encourage worksite participation. We also ask employers to participate in some broader land use and transportation work, such as commenting on comprehensive plans, the Regional Transportation, and initiatives such as Sustainable Thurston.   As an MPO/RTPO, we want to ensure broad public conversations about our plans and policies.

We reach out to ETC management with survey results - showing them results from nearby worksites as well so they can see what's going on nearby.

What are the key barriers you need to overcome to make your program even better?

Key barriers are the lack of the kind of support from state agencies that is called for in the law. Participation by management at state work sites goes from dedicated to laughable, despite Executive Orders. Employers just haven't embraced it. I believe the biggest barrier is at the mid level management level. They are often risk-averse about incentives, telework, and flexible work week/hours.

Biggest barriers are the lack of more direct support from government and mid management. It feels like CTR is the answer and we are finally asking the hard questions about climate change, greenhouse gases and yet state government is not making connections.

Clearly, we could use more money. CTR funding has been flat financially for 20 years. This is problematic. I appreciate the opportunity for the new grant program.

If you had additional resources, what would you do with them to make your program better?

Major focus would be three things: 1) enhance partnership with Intercity Transit with a focus on vanpool programs (vanpool mode share has more potential than transit) and vans are available. 2) In conjunction with business and government community, focus on telework. Through other grants, we have completed important work on the benefits of telework, for example and want to continue to work with OFM, the Governor's office, and our local partners. Telework is the smartest answer – especially with I-5 congestion. We can deploy more transit, but absent a fix to the capacity of the Nisqually River Bridges and installation of HOV lanes, more transit cannot be the only answer. 3) Need for more resources to better support management. We don't have the funds to do as many site visits with ETCs/management to work on their current programs and help with worksite-specific concerns and opportunities.

We are also interested in exploring neighborhood-based program. Several years ago, with federal Department of Energy funds, we focused on residents and businesses on a key corridor.

What is the single most important thing the state provides to your CTR/TDM program?

Safe Ride program – Emergency Ride Home, even though seldom used provides some level of comfort for people to make changes in their behavior. Many people fear, what is my kids are sick – how will I get home to them. This program needs more advertisement. We want to create an app with information on smart phones and have cards like an insurance card to be used when needed.

How do you and your customers use the information from the CTR Employer Survey Reports?

We primarily use it to shame other employers! For some very good reasons, survey processing has taken an inordinate amount of time the past several cycles, therefore we are not able to provide timely information. People are used to immediate results, such as instant on-line polls. The fact that we must wait 6+ months renders the survey results almost worthless. When individuals and worksites go to the effort to do the survey we need to provide faster results.

Beyond the aforementioned "shaming," we use the results to counsel worksites. If they're going backwards or show downward trends, we use the survey to ask them how we make this better. Our jurisdictions are interested in support rather than punishment. So, we gently guide people with survey results and use them for calibrating modeling and looking at trends in transportation. We also use information to provide recognition to people.

We bring information and people to our Council and Policy Board for celebration.

How do you and your customers use the information from the Employer Annual Report and Program Description?

We have streamlined process to make it easier and more meaningful and do the full report only every other year. Since we didn't really have a survey database, analysis was not possible except at a manual high level.

What other methods do you use to measure the effectiveness of the program?

Beyond the basics of VMT and SOV, we measure thru participation in our networking meetings and other activities. For example, state worksites are required under the current coordinated plan to attend two networking sessions a year – (I would like to see that change) Worksite fairs count, basic training counts. We, of course, encourage them to come to sessions.
County also measure by participation in surveys – being on time, high response rates (we aim for 70 percent response rate and often get 90 or 100) ETC's work hard on that.

Effectiveness is also measured when we see that CTR program is used for reporting green house gases. They are not separate programs but integrated in sustainability and health programs – bringing the most benefit to employees, employers and communities. Obviously, mode split to reduce trips is an effective tool of measurement.

Which subsidies and incentives that you have used are the most effective at helping people change their behavior?

A mix is most effective. We don't directly provide incentives, other than small prizes at ETC events and fairs – really to model practices around rewarding interest and behavior change. Over the years, we have found that trinkets such as water bottles and umbrellas don't seem to produce behavioral change. We instead focus on encouraging worksites to market the StarPass and SafeRide programs. Having incentives about recognition are important.

It's difficult to figure out how to recognize people in a way that is of value and really calls out merit and innovation rather than just "everyone gets a certificate." We are looking at that in years to come. WSDOT needs to reinstate the Governors Commute Smart Awards. People liked that statewide recognition and the trappings of the governor's participation and use of the Mansion. ETCs commented that when they had that recognition, it was easier to motivate management at their worksite to expand and value their CTR program.

I have mixed feelings about financial incentives. The idea that we're going to continue to pay people for changing behavior may not be best use. Marketing studies do not confirm that "forever" incentives are effective strategies – and certainly not cost effective. Rather they suggest using such incentives/subsidies to motivate the behavior change and then reminding them of the benefits (i.e., cost savings) and then providing occasion "surprise" awards occasionally to reward the behavior.

Is it important to have the state CTR law?

Yes. Frankly absent the CTR law, there are some state agencies that wouldn't do anything. Compelling the private sector to comply is perhaps not the best strategy. We have fights from AWB, and Chambers about this. Although they believe CTR is a good thing they don't like the mandate aspect. I think a stronger mandate for government is a good idea, but a voluntary one should be explored by the private sector.

Also I think we need to go beyond the current CTR law. We need to expand commute trips to all trips. We have been very effective with our tiny market share, but could really make a difference if we broaden our audience. We have some opportunities now with aging baby boomers moving beyond a commute and some millennials choice to eschew vehicle ownership.   We need to address new markets with better options.