

TRIANGLE COMMUTER NEWS

SEPTEMBER 1993

A Publication of the Southwestern Pennsylvania Regional Planning Commission

Ridesharing? Call 471-POOL



Downtown traffic signals to become computer-controlled

An ambitious program designed to bring Pittsburgh's traffic signal system into the 21st century is about to get underway. Its advanced traffic management program, which has been in the planning stage since the late 1970s, will place nearly 500 of the city's 600 traffic-lighted intersections under the direction of a centralized computer.

Similar systems, which are widely used outside the United States, employ a combination of local sensors and databases reflecting previous traffic patterns to govern signals throughout their networks. Under normal operating circumstances, a computer-controlled signal network enables a city to improve its routine flow of traffic.

But under exceptional circumstances, it can readily adapt to change. Emergency vehicles can communicate with the system to pre-empt normal signaling patterns. Unusual traffic conditions created by accidents, parades, construction, or special events can be readily accommodated. And critical intersections can be monitored for changing conditions so that signal progressions can be easily and quickly revised.

Initiation of the program's startup phase, which is expected to

begin in the Spring of 1994, will encompass the 95 intersections controlled by traffic lights in downtown Pittsburgh. Subsequent phases, implemented over the following 3-5 year period, will branch out into other areas of the city, including Oakland, where many signals are currently linked to a master controller that synchronizes traffic lights inside the Forbes-Fifth corridor. The North Side, South Side and East Liberty areas will follow. Only then will the city's remaining districts be tied into the central computer.

At the outset, it may be difficult to recognize the new system at work. Existing traffic signal lamps, posts, and mast arms will continue to be used. Only the controllers will change, and they will be connected to the city's mainframe traffic computer by way of underground conduits.

Those conduits weren't always there. But over the past 15 years, in anticipation of eventually installing a centralized system,

Pittsburgh quietly laid its own cable conduits under major city streets. As other streets are rebuilt, they will also have conduits embedded beneath the surface to accommodate wiring needed for computer control.

Three-quarters of the \$3.8

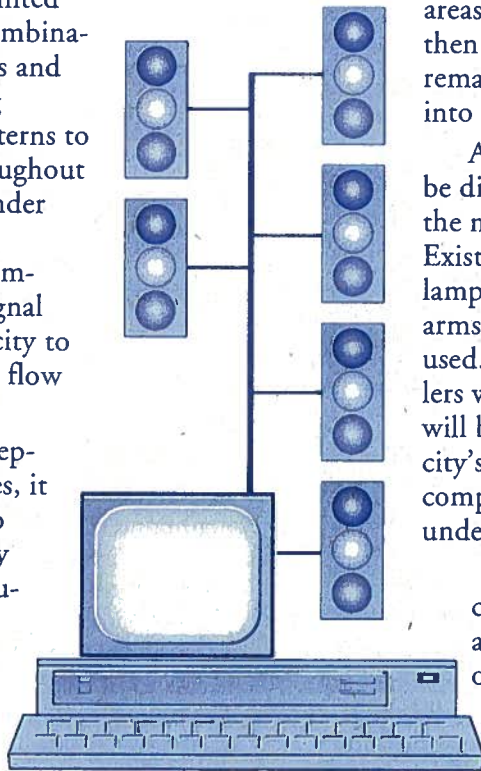
million downtown segment of the program is being financed through federal grants. It will take as long as 30 months before that phase of the project is fully operational, according to the city's engineering department. ▲

Allegheny County draws in commuters from all over the region

Census data collected in 1990 and released earlier this year show that of the 675,875 people employed in Allegheny County, more than 120,000 of them commute to work from other counties. That includes approximately 7,500 who live outside of Pennsylvania, the figures show. At the same time, the survey found nearly 40,000 Allegheny County residents who work outside the county limits.

Westmoreland County, with more than 40,000 residents coming into Allegheny County for work, is the single largest source of incoming commuters identified by the U.S. Census Bureau. At the same time, however, about 10,000 Allegheny County residents commute to Westmoreland. Washington and Beaver Counties, with 22,000 and 21,000 residents respectively commuting into Allegheny County, were the next largest.

Fewer than half of the people who work in Allegheny County actually work in the city of Pittsburgh, census figures show. Approximately 300,000 people worked in Pittsburgh at the time of the census. That figure included those working in downtown and Oakland as well as in other city neighborhoods. ▲



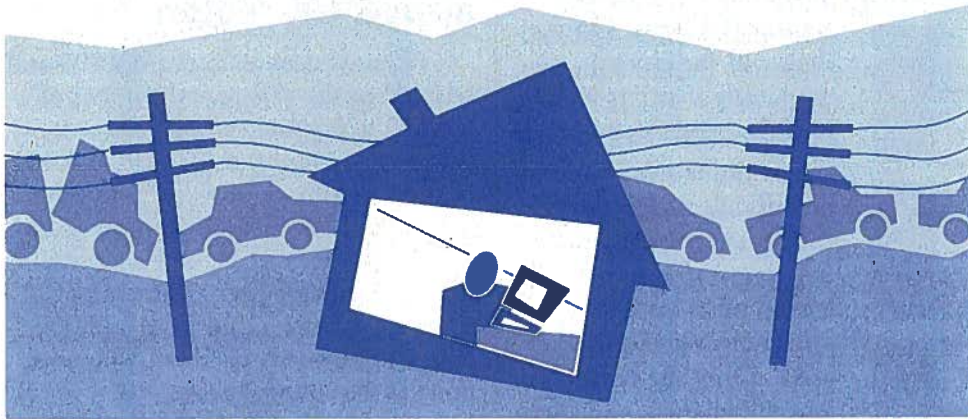
Telecommuters don't miss rush hour traffic

A survey conducted earlier this year by the Pennsylvania Technology Council found that twelve percent of the state's high-technology firms have employees who work at least a part of the time at home. Just one year earlier, in a similar survey, only seven percent reported allowing their employees to do so. That jump, combined with a growing number of self-employed professionals and a sharp decline in home office technology prices, may signal a long-expected shift in American work patterns. If it does, the residential patterns, commuting habits, and long-distance travel associated

managers, professionals and consultants as well as such downscale occupations as truck drivers, maintenance contractors, and forest workers. Nearly equal numbers of men and women are part of today's telecommuting workforce. Some are self-employed, others are salaried. Many others — particularly those in sales and customer service — are constantly in the field, working out of cars, hotel rooms, and customer locations.

For transportation planners and policy makers, the challenge of telecommuting is twofold. First, if

ment of a telecommuting economy. Telecommunication tools such as fax machines, modems, satellite systems and allied technologies have already become integral factors in our regional economy. At the same time, the study was unable to identify any western Pennsylvania firms which are aggressively pursuing telecommuting strategies for their own workers. Accordingly, the report recommended systematically gathering information which could help local policy makers to more effectively target and exploit the best opportunities for telecommunication growth. ▲



with work could also be in for a tidal change.

Telecommuting — the term coined to describe a trend toward working from remote locations — covers a wide range of activity. Depending on how it's defined, the number of American telecommuters varies anywhere from 20 to 40 million. But the fastest area of growth in 1992 was among company employees who work either part-time or full-time at home during normal business hours, according to *American Demographics* magazine.

By any definition, home-based telecommuters are a diverse population. They include high-income

decentralized work sites become the wave of the future, what effects will that have on traffic, on transit scheduling, on residential settlements, and related matters of political jurisdiction? And second, if encouraging and supporting telecommuters creates a local competitive advantage, how should states and municipal governments foster the growth of appropriate information technologies in their own regions?

In Pennsylvania, where telephone and CATV companies have been positioning themselves to build "information superhighways," a recent study by SPRPC found that the technical infrastructure is already in place to support the initial develop-

City staircases fall out of step with commuters

They're hard to see, particularly when summer's growth obscures them with leaves. They're hard to find, since most of them don't show up on published maps. They're hard to identify, since many of them go without names. And there's nothing decorative about them either. But climbing Pittsburgh's steep slopes and descending its long hillsides are more than 400 sturdy public staircases dating back to an era when foot travel was the mode of choice.

Remnants of an earlier time and lifestyle, the staircases continue to be maintained by city workers. Pittsburgh's annual budget dedicates several hundred thousand dollars a year just to repairing and rebuilding steps — particularly those which offer the only access to isolated houses. An average of five sets of steps are completely rebuilt each year by city workers.

Early photographs of the city show public staircases of heroic proportions. One climbed from the site of today's Station Square all the way to the top of Mt. Washington. Others rose from the floor of the East Street Valley. And a few descended from the upper North Side to the Ohio River shore, where

continued on next page

Western Penitentiary stands today.

At one time, they were the sinews that tied together Pittsburgh's homes, churches, stores and jobs. City sidewalks, steps and footpaths linked people and communities to one another. And hillside homes were built on slopes having no other address.

But increased prosperity and a glut of private cars caused walking to fall from favor. Staircases in many neighborhoods were abandoned. Others fell into decline. Today, it is mainly complaints from a handful of local residents that prompts city work crews to fix broken steps. Even then, it is mostly those staircases which provide the only access to isolated homes that receive priority attention.

However, as residents grow older, as homes are abandoned, and as the patrons of city steps die away, complaints have become fewer and fewer. So has the number of users. Over time, and without an affected constituency, Pittsburgh's unique system of steep slope stairs and footpaths — like the ferries, trolleys, cable cars and trains that preceded them — may slowly disappear. ▲

Detours, Delays and Diversion

With construction season at its peak, road crews are at work on projects throughout the region. Major projects affecting commuters to and from downtown Pittsburgh include:

I-79. Repairs to roadway sections between I-279 and the Butler County line have been underway for several months now. The replacement of cement slab sections will create traffic delays and a succession of lane restrictions as the rebuilding effort continues through November.

I-70. Work in Washington County on bridge decks, ramps and guide rails, which has been underway for some time, is expected to continue to cause delays through the remainder of the construction season.

Fort Pitt Tunnels. Work on a project to replace the granite facings of both the north and south tunnel openings is being concentrated into nighttime and weekend shifts. Closings occur between 10:00 PM and 5:00 AM with detour signs posted through the city's West End.

Tenth Street Bridge. Traffic will be restricted to one lane in each direction during weekdays, and closed altogether on some weekends, for the duration of a six month repair project on this link to the city's South Side. Traffic and bus rerouting through the Armstrong Tunnel, at the downtown end of the span, will remain in-effect until the project is complete.

Ninth Street Bridge. Renovations to this span linking downtown to the North Side will keep it closed through late November.



Vanpool Riders Needed

Weekday vanpools to downtown Pittsburgh depart from and return to communities throughout the region. Current passenger openings include the following:

From: Apollo, Vandergrift

Work times: 8:00 - 5:00
Monthly fare: \$85
Contact: Donald Speer
Phone: 261-0700

From: Mars, Cranberry

Work times: 8:15 - 5:00
Monthly fare: \$76
Contact: Patrick Dickson
Phone: 433-4549

From: Monroeville

Work times: 8:00 - 5:00
Monthly fare: \$70
Contact: Harry Banks
Phone: 433-4835

From: Murrysville, Export, Delmont

Work times: 8:00 - 5:00
Monthly fare: \$72
Contact: Linda Zoskey
Phone: 565-7914

From: Pleasant Hills

Work times: 8:00 - 5:00
Monthly fare: \$65
Contact: Wade Fox
Phone: 391-5599

From: Beaver Valley

Work times: 7:15 - 4:25
Monthly fare: \$110
Contact: Karen Catarcio
Phone: 338-5530

From: McKeesport, Versailles, Elizabeth

Work times: 7:30 - 4:30
Monthly fare: \$75
Contact: Bill Bury
Phone: 392-8773

From: Murrysville, Monroeville

Work times: 8:00 - 5:00
Monthly fare: \$65
Contact: Mark Gibson
Phone: 497-6792

From: Natrona Heights, Allegheny Valley

Work times: 8:00 - 5:00
Monthly fare: \$75
Contact: Carolyn Nulph
Phone: 261-3640

From: Steubenville, Weirton

Work times: 8:00 - 5:00
Monthly fare: \$75
Contact: Kim Sisinni
Phone: 255-8791

From: Irwin

Work times: 8:00 - 5:00
Monthly fare: \$69
Contact: Richard Peer
Phone: 281-4052

From: McKeesport, Port Vue

Work times: 8:00 - 5:00
Monthly fare: \$74
Contact: Lawrence Furlong
Phone: 562-6225

From: Murrysville, Export

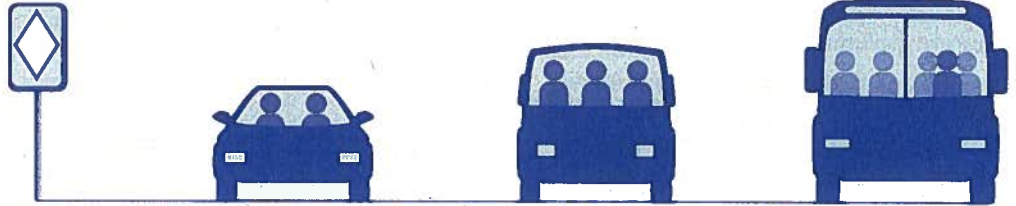
Work times: 8:00 - 5:00
Monthly fare: \$88
Contact: Barry Ryan
Phone: 234-6152

From: New Kensington, Oakmont, Plum

Work times: 8:15 - 5:15
Monthly fare: \$74
Contact: Robert Deutsch
Phone: 288-1708



Local employers assess ridesharing incentives



TransitChek is a comparatively new program. Introduced locally by PAT in 1992, it takes advantage of changes in the federal tax code allowing firms to offer their employees public transit vouchers as a tax-exempt benefit. But even though relatively few companies now participate in the program, TransitChek elicited more interest among local human resource directors than any other ridesharing incentive, according to a recent survey conducted by SPRPC. Preliminary returns on the survey also revealed that traditional carpool and vanpool programs, in addition to flexible work hours, enjoy high levels of interest as well as active participation by employers in the Pittsburgh area.

Respondents showed the least interest in telecommuting, where employees perform their work from remote locations. That came as a

surprise, particularly since employees at a number of the responding companies already work from home or field locations linked to their offices by phone lines. A related story on telecommuting appears on page two of this newsletter.

The ridesharing survey, which went to 264 employers of various sizes and types in Pittsburgh's central business district, was part of an effort to manage the traffic headaches arising from the two-year long reconstruction of the Fort Pitt Bridge and Tunnel, expected to begin in 1995. In addition to seeking out baseline information about company practices related to commuting, the survey attempted to determine what role SPRPC should play in future efforts to encourage ridesharing.

Respondents rated building awareness of ridesharing through public relations and education as the

single most important job for SPRPC. Providing meaningful incentives to rideshare was also cited by many of those responding. Incentives to ridesharing would presumably include identifying financial benefits, minimizing administrative effort, improving travel times, and assuring rides home in case of emergency.

A large-scale vanpool program coordinated by SPRPC currently transports approximately 1,000 commuters from communities throughout the region into downtown Pittsburgh and back every weekday. Information on that program is available by calling 471-POOL. Human resource and communication directors who have not participated but wish to be included in the SPRPC ridesharing survey, can request a questionnaire by calling 471-7665. ▲

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