

Job Access in the Cranberry Area

Critical issues affecting workforce and economic development
in southwestern Pennsylvania

Executive Summary

This study looks at issues that impact access to jobs in the Cranberry area, with broader implications for other suburban growth areas. The study arose out of the need to understand barriers affecting workers' access to jobs, despite Cranberry Township's pro-active planning efforts and the reverse-commute transit routes implemented by the Port Authority of Allegheny County in 2000.

The study was designed to determine what impact job access has on employers and transit-dependent workers in the Cranberry area. In addition, the study intended to identify barriers that impede employer-employee matches and produce information that could be used to strategically overcome job-access barriers.

A 'spatial mismatch' exists between workers and jobs.

The study finds that a *spatial mismatch* between workers and avail-

able jobs has evolved in the southwestern Pennsylvania region. Selected for its representative characteristics, the Cranberry area magnifies a national trend at least 30 years in the making: economic growth is focused in suburban areas little-served by public transit, while low-income job seekers are concentrated in urban and rural areas. Suburban employers face escalating difficulty in recruiting and retaining qualified workers, particularly for entry-level positions, yet these jobs are often inaccessible to urban and rural job seekers with entry-level skills.

Ultimately, the study concludes that transportation, childcare, and affordable housing all play critical roles in meeting employers' workforce needs and enabling individuals to get and keep good jobs. Alleviating job access barriers in the Cranberry area—as well as elsewhere—will require collaborative regional planning across land use, transportation, economic development, and workforce development interests.

Research Scope and Data

Analysis of U.S. Census 2000 data from Allegheny, Beaver, and Butler counties provided the bulk of information on workforce characteristics and affordable housing. Information on business and employment was collected through *County Business Patterns* series (U.S. Census Bureau), Bureau of Labor Statistics' *Quarterly Census of Employment and Wages*, and the Dun and Bradstreet business database. Information on employers' needs and perceptions was generated in the fall of 2003 through phone interviews with a representative

sample of 100 Cranberry area employers. Job seeker surveys conducted in 2002 through the downtown Pittsburgh CareerLink provided the main source of data on worker needs and perceptions. Data on childcare were provided by childcare resource developers of Pennsylvania. Finally, the Southwestern Pennsylvania Commission (SPC) and the Port Authority of Allegheny County provided data on transit lines serving the Cranberry area.

Findings and Implications

- Even in a weak economy, Cranberry area businesses report difficulties in recruiting and retaining entry-level and some skilled workers.
- The spatial mismatch between jobs and workers in the Cranberry area imposes costs on area employers as well as on prospective employees and the broader community.

Improved public transit services alone cannot fix job-access problems in the Cranberry area.

- Employers believe that limited transportation options represent a barrier that prevents transit-dependent Allegheny County workers from filling entry-level jobs in the Cranberry area.
- Other significant barriers cited by employers included low wages associated with entry-level jobs, undesirable work hours, lack of benefits, and lack of affordable housing and accessible childcare, as well as an overall lack of workers with specific skills.
- The Cranberry area's job-access challenges are one consequence of shortcomings in current land use planning and development practices. Preventing similar problems in the future will require new approaches to land use and development decisions.

Worker availability and job access were not considered by most employers in decisions to locate in the Cranberry area.

Priority Recommendations

Employers can improve their ability to find and keep good employees by providing transportation and childcare resource information, and by offering competitive benefits such as flex time, transit subsidies, ride-sharing, childcare benefits, or housing benefits. Several existing programs can be tapped, including EZ GOLD and Commute Info.

Employers can become actively involved in establishing Transportation Demand Management (TDM) initiatives such as Transportation Management Associations (TMAs). Alignment with local workforce development agencies could also help employers reach qualified job seekers.

Transportation planners, providers, and policymakers should look to public transit and other alternative transportation modes to improve service and contain growing traffic congestion in suburban areas. At the same time, public transit can increase mobility within the community, facilitate residents' outbound commute, and bring workers and consumers in.

Federal and state officials should appropriate reliable and flexible funding for both public transit and other multi-modal solutions. A priority is to equalize matching between transit and highways funding. Another priority is to diversify application of funding streams, for example providing non-transportation funds (e.g., Temporary Assistance for Needy Families, or TANF) for use as match dollars. Funding flexibility enables the development of more creative solutions to job access barriers, e.g., reverse commutes, TMAs, and other unconventional approaches. Also, regional coordination of transportation systems should be improved.

Land use and economic development planners and policymakers can help minimize the public expense of costly new or retrofitted infrastructure by bringing transportation and workforce experts to the table prior to development decisions. Coordination of regional planning with all stakeholders should be pursued. And, workforce and job access issues should be formally integrated into the early stages of the economic development review process.

Workforce development professionals should note that this research highlights the movement of labor markets across arbitrary boundaries, and that employers perceive certain technical skills to be underrepresented in the workforce. Coordination of service delivery systems is needed to better serve regional labor markets. Also, workforce development professionals should deepen their knowledge and understanding of the labor market, and continue to make training investments in direct response to employer demand.

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