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REUTERS 

Americans commute longer, farther than ever

By Ellen Wulforth *Thu Apr 20, 4:07 PM ET*

Dave Givens drives 370 miles

to work and back every day and considers his seven-hour commute the best answer to balancing his work with his personal life.

The winner of a nationwide contest to find the commuter with the longest trek, Givens is one of millions of people who are commuting longer and farther than ever before.

Studies show Americans spend more time than ever commuting and for a growing number, getting to work takes more than an hour. In the most recent U.S. Census Bureau study, 2.8 million people have so-called extreme commutes, topping 90 minutes.

Givens, a 46-year-old electrical engineer, has an extreme commute between home in Mariposa, California, and his job in San Jose. He leaves home before dawn and returns after dark.

His trip landed him first place among almost 3,000 entries in the search for America's longest commute, sponsored by automotive services provider Midas Inc. and announced last week. But as harrowing or tedious as Givens' trip may sound, he says it's the way to keep the home and job he loves.

"I have the balance right now," Givens told Reuters. "I could do similar jobs closer, but not with the work reward and job satisfaction I have. And I could live closer, but I wouldn't have the lifestyle that I desire.

"To me, this is not that long a commute," he added. "It's just something I do to go to work."

SUBURB-TO-SUBURB COMMUTING

Longer commutes frequently involve people who live in one suburb and work in another, said Alan Pisarski, author of "Commuting in America."

Such a pattern tends to begin with companies moving out of a city to a suburb, enticing workers to move to less-expensive outer suburbs, he told Reuters. "People see this as an opportunity to go farther away," he said.

Such a move may provide more affordable housing or better schools. Even high fuel costs -- Givens spends about \$185 a week on gasoline -- can pay off in a better quality of life, Pisarski said.

Doreen DeJesus rides a bus from her home in Tobyhanna, Pennsylvania, across New Jersey to her job in Manhattan.

The payoff is a house in the country, she said.

"It's a matter of getting away from the hustle and bustle of the city," said DeJesus, 37. "It's not an easy thing, but most days it's really worth it.

"My boss thinks I'm nuts," she added.

Studies show 7.6 percent of U.S. commuters traveled more than an hour to work in 2004, the most recent data available, up from 6 percent in 1990. The average one-way commute grew by 13 percent to 25.5 minutes between 1990 and 2000.

In 1990, only in New York state did more than 10 percent of workers spend more than an hour to get to work, Pisarski said. Now that situation

can be found in New Jersey, Maryland, Illinois and California as well, he said.

CONGESTION WORSENS

Added to long commutes is increased congestion, according to the Texas Transportation Institute's 2005 Urban Mobility Report. Commuters typically spent 47 hours a year in traffic jams, up from 40 hours a decade earlier, the study showed.

"That's the time wasted above and beyond just being able to make the trip," said David Schrank, co-author of the report.

But the trips can be worthwhile, said Kay Phillips who works in Chapel Hill, North Carolina, 164 miles from her home in Granite Falls.

"I really love what I do, so I don't mind," she said.

While Givens spends much of his commute listening to the radio, especially traffic reports, Philips, 52, uses her five-hour commute in her own way -- she prays.

"I say a long prayer starting out every morning for everybody, and it gives you quite a bit of time to do that," she said.

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