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Wittman pushing for more telecommuting

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By KELLY HANNON

Rep. Rob Wittman is a lifelong commuter, and consequently an advocate for teleworking.

Wittman's work commute has ranged from 46 to 72 miles, depending on the distance between his office and his home in the Northern Neck.

"I wish during times in my career that I would've had the opportunity, as a state worker, to telework," Wittman said.

Often there's no reason paperwork has to be done in a central location, he said.

Teleworking improves a worker's quality of life, reduces traffic, helps the environment, makes federal agencies more efficient, and can allow workers to perform government business from remote locations in an emergency, Wittman said.

"I don't see anywhere out there where there is a negative side to this," he said.

Wittman wants the federal government to track how many workers at each government agency are teleworking. He wants Congress to ensure compliance with the 2008 regulation that eligible federal workers be allowed to telecommute for 20 percent of their work hours every two weeks.

"Then you'd have a very transparent report each year about what's going on, who's up to speed, who's not," Wittman said.

Once it has an objective report, Congress could step in with directives to help agencies meet the 20 percent standard, Wittman said.

Only a minority of federal employees telework. During 2007, just under 8 percent of federal workers in the U.S. teleworked, a total of 94,643 employees. That number was a decrease from 2006, when 110,592 federal employees teleworked.

It's unknown how the economy will affect teleworking in 2009.

Federal employees in the Fredericksburg area may be reluctant to be out of their supervisors' sight, even if they accomplish as much work--or more--when they work outside the office.

Yesterday, Wittman got a tour of the Spotsylvania telework center, located in the Southpoint shopping center in the Massaponax area. It's one of 14 telework centers operated by the General Services Administration in the Washington area.

Wittman was joined by Robert Patton, who oversees Washington-area telework centers at the GSA, and Bob Wilson, executive director of the George Washington Regional Commission, which runs the telework centers in Stafford, Spotsylvania and Woodbridge.

The men spoke with Wittman for nearly an hour about ways to encourage teleworking.

Patton teleworks twice a week from his home in Manassas, and allows most of those who report directly to him to telecommute, too.

"It boils down to one word, 'trust,'" Patton said.

Patton trusts that the same high-quality work produced in the office will be done at home.

Plus, everyone's in constant contact now anyway, he said--through cell phones, e-mail, instant messaging and texting.

If his supervisor needs a number right away, he can get it to him just as fast from home as he could in the office, Patton said.

"It's the results," Patton said. "That's what you should be concentrating on, not the face time."

Wittman agreed.

"The key is overcoming in people's minds that you don't have to be able to look face to face at somebody in order to ensure they doing the job, doing a good job, and that they are effective," Wittman said.

In addition, the congressman said he will work to find funding to start a secure telework center for federal employees who do intelligence work. The center would probably be a pilot program, Wittman said.

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For information on government-run telework centers in the Fredericksburg area, visit gotelework.org.

Seats in federally operated telework centers in the Fredericksburg area are 60 percent full on an average day, said Bob Wilson, executive director of the George Washington Regional Commission, which co-operates the facilities with the General Services Administration.

Monday and Friday are the most popular days in the telework centers.

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