Reverse psychology
by KEN SCHACHTER
With Big Apple employment stalled, workers increasingly trek to the suburbs

When lawyer Pia Riverso leaves Rivkin Radler's Uniondale offices at day's end, she doesn't retreat to a leafy North Shore hideaway or an East End villa.

Instead, she hops into her black BMW convertible - a "midlife crisis car," she calls it - and 58 miles and 1 hour and 10 minutes later, she arrives at her home in bucolic Yorktown Heights.

Riverso is one of thousands of workers who are changing the traditional commuter flow chart. Rather than following the one-way pattern of living in "bedroom communities" such as Nassau and Suffolk and earning bread in Manhattan, workers are staying within their home counties or traveling to jobs in adjacent counties other than New York.

The phenomenon is labeled "sideways commuting" by Jason Bram, an economist at the Federal Reserve Bank of New York. "There are more people commuting every which way," said Bram, who wrote a new study about workers' traveling patterns in the New York City area.

Though the number of inbound commuters to Manhattan edged up 4.6 percent between 1980 and 2000, the increases were far larger to outlying counties.

Among the big gainers, according to the Federal Reserve study, were Nassau and Suffolk.

In 2000, 45,000 more workers were commuting to Nassau County than 20 years earlier, a 30.2 percent increase, while Suffolk had a 62.3 percent increase. (The study found similar double-digit gains in Westchester County, at 51.7 percent; Bergen, at 43 percent; and Middlesex, at 75.4 percent.)

Seth Forman, deputy director of the Long Island Regional Planning Board, noted that many of those commuters coming to Nassau and Suffolk increasingly are New York City residents.

In 1980, he said, 64,000 city residents commuted to jobs in Nassau and Suffolk, but by 2000, the number had risen to 105,478.

During the same period, the percentage of workers who lived in Nassau, but commuted to New York City remained static at about 33 percent. Suffolk workers, however, increasingly balked at traveling to the Big Apple. Their numbers fell from 15 percent in 1980 to 12 percent, or 79,939 workers, in 2000.

A decline among Long Islanders commuting to Manhattan also was reflected in recent statistics from the Long Island Rail Road. In 2000, an average of 110,200 riders took the LIRR into the city from Long Island during the morning rush hour, but by 2004, that number had declined 10 percent to 98,030.

"One big thing we noticed in the last 20 years is there's an ongoing dispersion of people and jobs," Bram said. "New York City hasn't grown
as fast as county's outside. Jobs are moving out. Though Manhattan still dominates, there's more reverse commuting."

Why have Nassau and Suffolk become commuter magnets?

"It's definitely Long Island's affluence and growth as a source of jobs," Forman said. "We've created 100,000 jobs in the last 10 years and New York City has created none. We remain an economic engine and New York City has relinquished that function. This follows a general pattern of metropolitan regions where businesses and economic opportunity continues to sprawl because of technology."

On a recent day, technology allowed Riverso to work on a brief with a company-supplied computer at her home, while she kept one eye peeled on her garden where she spotted a "three-or-four-point buck" and a flock of turkeys that makes morning and afternoon passes through her yard.

Though the average commuting time has edged up in 2000 to 29 minutes for residents of Nassau and 24 minutes for residents of Suffolk, technology also allows people to use that time more productively.

"You can actually get work done on the train or bus," said Bram, who has a 35-minute commute from his home in Manhattan to the Fed's offices. "Between pagers and laptops, there's more opportunity ... though you don't want to have people on the Long Island Expressway working on their laptop."

The new crazy-quilt commuting pattern also can have advantages for employers.

"One thing about the New York metropolitan area that makes it unique for companies is you have access to this huge workforce," said Bram, whose report was prepared over more than a year. "If you set up shop somewhere in the metro area, you can tap into this huge labor force, not only in your county, but on Long Island, New York City, Westchester or wherever."

When it comes to commuting, three out of four Long Island workers still drive alone in their car, Forman said. Statistics from 2004 found little more than one in 10 take mass transportation, while 8.1 percent are in a carpool.

Though many decry the auto as a highly inefficient way to commute, Forman said cars are "misunderstood and underrated."

Cars can make their owners vastly more efficient by allowing them to travel to a second job or "chain trip" by dropping off children and going on errands, he said.

"Autos make people more productive," Forman said. "The problem is it's expensive. There's a large part of the population that's locked out of the car market."

Other regions have seen bus and light rail projects costing hundreds of millions of dollars become "a huge public subsidy because ridership never meets the goals," he added.

One school of "policy wonks," he added, believes that more public money should be spent to make cars more efficient by experimenting with HOV lanes whose cost goes up and down depending on the level of congestion.
Congestion or not, Riverso, a former Roslyn Heights resident, is not looking back after trading her seven-mile commute for a 58-mile jaunt to and from Yorktown Heights.

"It's like going to your country home every evening," she said.

Ken Schachter
General Assignment Reporter
Long Island Business News
Direct Dial: 631.913.4225
ken.schachter@libn.com