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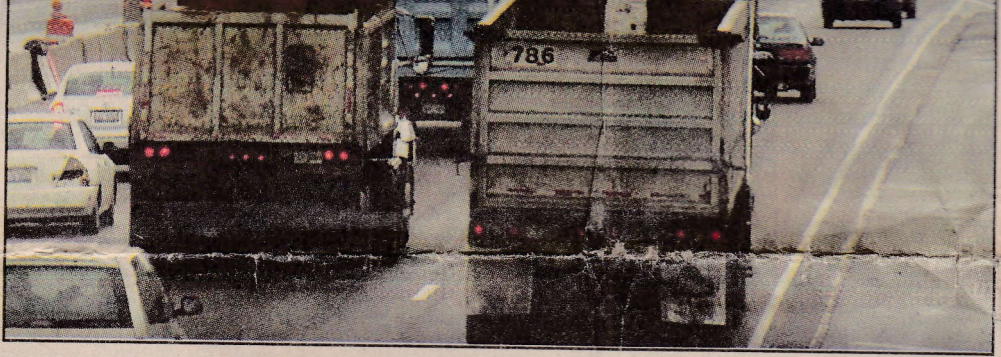
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SECTION E

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An increase in commuters from Northwest Indiana into Chicago has led to traffic problems heading into the city.

ILLINOIS-BOUND

More workers making the northwest commute into Chicago and beyond

Small-town living and schooling, attractively-priced homes, and the decline of the steel industry are boosting the number of Northwest Indiana residents who commute, sometimes more than an hour and a half each way, to jobs in Illinois.

According to a study by the Center for Workforce Innovations, a not-for-profit corporation that studies problems of workers in Northwest Indiana, nearly 40,000 Hoosiers now make the commute into Illinois from five counties in the region.

Though the Center doesn't provide earlier figures to compare, its president Linda Woloshansky said the study indicates that "we're starting to see some increases in commuters in the region."

Chicago real estate agent Connie Atterbury moved from the city to LaPorte County and now drives more than 100 miles each way, usually four days a week.

"We were at a crossroads with our children's education, we wanted to get off the private school track and we liked the small community," Atterbury said.

Breaking down the statistics, Woloshansky said



Traffic fills I 90/ I 94 in both directions during early morning commuter hours.

Average commute times

Indiana	
1990	20 minutes
2000	22 minutes
Lake County	
1990	24 minutes
2000	27 minutes
Longest local commute	
St. John -	34 minutes (up 30 percent from 1990 commute of 26 minutes)

Porter County	
1990	23 minutes
2000	26 minutes
Longest local commute	
Hebron -	32 minutes (up 19 percent from 1990 commute of 27 minutes).
Illinois	
1990	25 minutes
2000	28 minutes

most of the commuters – 32,734 in all – come from Lake County. Jasper County, just south of Lake County and contiguous to Illinois, exports another 658 workers into Illinois.

Porter County, about 40 miles east of Chicago, is

home to 5,000 commuters. Just south of Porter, Newton County provides 600 commuters while LaPorte, east of Porter, rounds out the commuting group at 595.

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Bound

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This huge daily migration contrasts with the much smaller number of people - 11,808 - who cross the border into Indiana from Illinois for work.

Woloshansky said much of the Indiana "out-commuting" can be blamed on the sinking steel industry.

"I suspect it's increasing because the economy in Chicago is still solid, while the steel industry here has eroded," she stated.

She also said that talented and mobile Indiana construction workers often find wages across the border tempting.

Increasing ridership on South Shore Line commuter trains to Chicago's Randolph Street Station, which carry more than 100 percent of their capacity, has prompted station improvements such as expanded parking lots.

A current \$250 million "realignment" project is intended to accommodate not only existing commuters, but an additional 7,000 daily riders by 2020.

Vicki Johnson, a Century 21 real estate agent whose clients live in Porter, LaPorte and Lake Counties, said agents tout the region's "Chicago living at Indiana prices."

"There's extra land, the taxes are lower, the schools are better and there's not so much 'rush-rush,'" Johnson said. "There's a small-town charisma that you get."

She said Chicagoans have been drawn to the area for at least seven years.

"Of course it slowed a bit last year," Johnson said. "But there are still plenty of people who are out buying and looking around."

She said buyers like the reasonable cost of living and housing, as well as the high quality of property and sur-

rounding land.

Johnson said she recently closed a house in Crown Point for an older couple. The farmhouse sat on six acres and included an expansive horse barn. The price tag: \$260,000.

The National Association of Realtors reports that modest single-family homes in Chicago average \$166,000, while average homes in the Gary-Hammond area cost \$98,000.

"We have the best mix of both worlds," Johnson boasted. "Chicago's not too far away, so these families can still take advantage of everything the city has to offer, while also having that small-town charm and great schools ... There's a lot of town spirit, a lot of parent support, and it can be a lot of fun."

But, Johnson admitted, "there's a lot less obvious activities to choose from. We don't have as much theatre as Chicago, so there's a lot of home entertainment—a lot of creative entertainment."

The commuting study by the Center for Workforce Innovations grew out of a business-labor conference it sponsored last November. The conference report expressed concern about the commuting growth, contending that "a reserve of talented people needs to be retained in the community to increase the region's tax revenues and quality of life."

The Center, in conjunction with the Corporation for a Skilled Workforce, found that the region has lost 3.8 percent of its labor force since 1995, despite population growth, especially in Jasper and Porter Counties, which grew 20 percent and 13.9 percent, respectively, from 1990 to 2000. Newton County grew 7.6 percent, with LaPorte and Lake Counties at 2.8 percent and 1.9 percent, respectively.