

Ithaca Journal, February 2, 2006
Section: Local
Edition: 1
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Car sharing: Right place, right time
Journal Editorial Staff

In a world where big ideas often evaporate before hitting the ground, sometimes a worthwhile notion doesn't get a second look. For many of us, that might have been the case with an idea called "car sharing" that was the focus of a local summit at the Tompkins County Library one week ago today.

The notion is simple enough to tickle anyone's common sense bone.

According to research based on AAA and Department of Transportation figures as well as surveys by car sharing backers, the average American will spend more than \$7,450 per year on a car — insurance, gas, parking, etc. That may be a necessity if you drive 15,000 miles a year or more and rely on a car every day, but hundreds of thousands of people don't. Many, predominantly in urban areas, use a car just a few times a week or less but still pay for insurance, parking and more. Those cars, largely idle, clog city streets and public parking ramps.

Car sharing targets those occasional users. A group of people gets together, usually as a not-for-profit, and assembles a small fleet of cars. In the case of the successful small-scale Boulder, Colo. car share project, users pay \$115 in one-time fees to join, then \$10 a month after that. Five cars are parked throughout the city, and its 65 members call a telephone line to schedule use of any of the vehicles. Members also pay a 50 cents/mile and \$1/hour fee based on use. In San Francisco's much larger not-for-profit City CarShare program, about 4,000 users share 100 vehicles throughout the bay area.

Advocates say if you drive less than 10,000 miles a year and don't need a car for long trips, this arrangement can save you lots of money. It also can replace the need for a rarely used but money-eating second car in many households.

Beyond that, a 2005 report called "Car Sharing in North America" by The Institute of Transportation Studies at UC Davis found that car sharing programs typically took between six and 23 cars off the road for every one they operated, meaning less parking problems in urban areas. The study found that members focusing on just the driving they need to do tend to reduce the overall miles by 44 percent, meaning less fuel used, less pollution and less traffic congestion. Car sharing programs in Europe are said to reduce carbon emissions for the average user by 40-50 percent. Advocates in Boston, Boulder and San Francisco also report members sell second cars, avoid new car purchases; and walk, bike or use public transportation more frequently.

Keep in mind none of these efforts is taxpayer-draining government projects, nor do any of them come with large bureaucracies or mounds of red tape. All of the programs, now more than 30 not-for-profit and for-profit operations across North America, are powered only by an idea whose time has come, and come to the right place.

Is Ithaca one of those places?

That all depends upon you. Boulder's effort started with a single household and one car. Local organizers are now trying to find out if there are enough people in Ithaca willing to kick the American auto addiction and become just occasional users - and do their bit to ease urban congestion, help the environment and save a few bucks at the same time. Give this community's deep, green roots, it's easy to imagine a car-share effort succeeding here. With so much to gain, and so little risk in trying, this is an idea definitely worth a good, hard second look.

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