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Carshare Program Fosters Sustainable Transportation in Ithaca

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News Story

Imagine if one car on the road could take the place of 15. There would be less pollution, less traffic, fewer accidents and subdued road rage. Finding a parking spot would be like shopping in a fully-stocked store, and the cost of gas would drop in keeping with a reduced market demand. Thanks to Ithaca Carshare, a program that launched on June 25 with similar goals in mind, such a utopian vision could become a reality.

The program, which enables members to rent shared cars by the hour — 24 hours a day, seven days a week — is part of a growing network of independent car-sharing organizations across the country, many of which were formed in response to rising gas prices and environmental concerns.

Though Carshare is new to Ithaca, the impetus for its creation was the Redbud Woods protests of 2005 over the controversial demolition of a wooded area for a 176-space parking lot. At the time, the Cornell community was becoming more aware of the need for sustainable transportation. Students committed to improving transportation on campus met with former president Hunter Rawlings III and formed a committee to help develop a car share program, according to Daniel Roth, a sustainability coordinator and member of the committee.

In 2004, Cornell joined municipal planning professionals to consider bringing a car share program to the area, but it was not until January 2005 that a national car share firm contacted Cornell about starting the program on campus. However, the firm was seeking monthly revenue provided by Cornell with the stipulation that all profits would go to the firm, according to David Lieb, assistant director of University Transportation Services.

“We expressed a desire to see the program not solely on campus but available to the whole community,” Lieb said. “We also wanted a more equitable investment in and benefit from the revenues. It seemed as if the only alternative, if we wanted car sharing in Ithaca, was to build it ourselves.”

Representatives from different car sharing programs proposed the model for Ithaca Carshare in 2006 at a car-sharing summit where they discussed the details of the program. Cornell provided funding to support the formation of a steering committee and after a number of meetings, Ithaca Carshare submitted an application in July for a cost-shared agreement — a grant that matched local contributions to the program — from the New York State Energy Research and Development Administration and the New York State Department of Transportation.

In October 2006, Ithaca Carshare formed after receiving a \$175,000 reward from the grant, as well as Cornell’s ongoing funds, Lieb said. Additionally, according to Roth, a group of Ithaca College students in a business class developed a key business model for Ithaca Carshare.

After the summit, Carshare began to captivate the community and build upon the “political will” of various groups in the community.

"[It] captured peoples' imagination about what was possible ... People were talking about it [and] it became a much more common idea," Roth said.

Carshare officially started taking member applications in late April around Earth Day. Since then, over 100 members have applied for the program according to Jennifer Dotson, executive of Carshare.

"There was a call for it in the Ithaca Community," Dotson said.

Carshare organizations nation-wide are independent, but many use existing organizations as resources. A code of ethics for car sharing is currently being developed within the industry, according to Tanya Seaman, co-founder and executive director of PhillyCarShare.

Because Ithaca is home to two colleges, it was important for the program to offer its service to students, said Any Goodell, assistant director of Carshare. While most car sharing services require that members be 21 years old for insurance purposes, Ithaca Carshare had to find an insurance company that would cover the 18 to 20 year old bracket.

Members must be 18 years old, possess a valid driver's license and have two years of driving experience. Members seeking to use one of Carshare's six vehicles can make reservations online or through an automated phone system. Unlike traditional car rental services, users have their own key card to operate the vehicles and do not have to fill out additional paperwork before each rental.

Ithaca Carshare currently has two plans, one plan for frequent vehicle use and one for members who only need to use a car once in a while. The plan for frequent use covers two members and costs \$200 per year plus an additional \$4.95 an hour and \$0.20 per mile. The second plan for less frequent vehicle use costs \$50 to join for a year, \$7.95 per hour and \$0.20 per mile.

The cars — all fuel-efficient Nissan Versas, adorned with the company's logo — are located in downtown Ithaca, Fall Creek, Cornell, Ithaca College, Collegetown and EcoVillage. There are currently no hybrid vehicles available, though Carshare hopes to eventually add these vehicles to the fleet.

The average cost of owning a car is \$650 per month, for a car that is parked, on average, 95 percent of the time, according to Ithaca Carshare. A Carshare member can save \$400 a month because they are only paying for a portion of the car, Goodell explained. Members are asked to fill the gas tank when it is less than one-quarter full, and the cost of fuel is covered by a fuel card kept inside the car.

While members save by reducing the costly burdens of gas, maintenance and insurance, cost efficiency is not be the only benefit of Carshare.

"We are helping Ithaca by lowering the amount of cars using the roads and adding to our infrastructures wear and tear," Goodell said. "For areas with dense parking, we hope to have our cars available since for every Carshare vehicle, about 15 others come off the road, which makes it easier for others to find parking as well."

Since Carshare reduces the number of vehicles on the road, climate-altering emissions are reduced. According to Goodell, 68 percent of Carshare's members are considering getting rid of their cars, which further reduces emissions. Additionally, the program allows people who might not have access to cars the opportunity to use a vehicle at any time.

"I share a family car and sometimes need it when another needs it. I joined for those occasions. They are predictable and I can sign up knowing the time slots I need," said Barbara Pease, who recently signed up for Carshare.

Both Cornell and Ithaca College are offering prepaid memberships to students, staff and faculty in the fall.

Cornell pre-purchased 2,000 Carshare memberships with the hope that the initiative will minimize the number of single-occupancy vehicles on campus. The program will offer the Cornell community easy access to cars at locations where membership is concentrated, according to Lieb.

Although Roth acknowledged that there may not be any immediate benefits on campus due to Carshare this

fall, he maintains high hopes that the program will grow.

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