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Students fuel car-sharing concept

Nonprofit's 700 members mostly run errands

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College students seem to share just about everything, from dorm rooms and study notes to pizza and beer. Now, add cars to that list.

In its first year in business, the nonprofit Ithaca Carshare initiative has enrolled more than 700 members, many of them students.

"They've really picked up on the car-sharing concept," said Carshare director Jennifer Dotson. "They love the service. They use it all the time."

And who can blame them? With soaring insurance premiums, fuel prices and Collegetown parking at a premium, the cost-conscious part-time residents have found that it makes better sense to pay \$7.95 an hour and 20 cents a mile to run the occasional errand rather than invest in keeping a car on campus.

As part of its initiatives to promote more sustainable transportation, Cornell University will cover the \$50 fee for membership to the "Just In Case" package for students and employees enrolled in a commuter program. Likewise, Ithaca College subsidizes student membership so it only costs \$20 per semester, while staff get \$50 in Carshare credit for signing up.

With most Americans forking out hundreds of dollars a month to use and maintain their cars, Dotson said it's definitely a more economical choice; 80 percent of the Carshare trips cost less than \$20, and there's a gas card in every glove compartment, so members don't even have to pay for fuel.

In many cases, it's also more convenient, with 10 Carshare vehicles reliably located in dedicated spots on both campuses and at several locations downtown. Members can call ahead to reserve cars, but most are available for spur-of-the-moment use.

Dotson said the program's most popular vehicle has been the Nissan Versa parked on College Avenue at Dryden Road, followed by the Toyota Tacoma pickup truck in front of Gimme! Coffee on North Cayuga Street. Usage at EcoVillage in Ithaca's West Hill has also increased dramatically in the past six months, she said.

Almost 90 percent of the trips are less than 25 miles, and only 5 percent last more than four hours, suggesting the cars are being used primarily to run errands.

Some members have signed up for the service as an alternative to car ownership altogether, while others use it as a backup, or to avoid buying a second car for the household. Dotson estimates that the program has helped keep 200 cars off the road.

"We do sell TCAT bus passes as well, and we find a lot of our members are using other transportation as they shift out of the car mindset," she added.

Member Gary Ferguson hasn't entirely given up his daily commute into the city from his country home, but he often turns to the Carshare on days when he loses the battle for use of the family car.

As director of the Downtown Ithaca Alliance, his schedule is often packed with back-to-back meetings all around the area.

"Without a car, it could be constraining," Ferguson said. "The Carshare is extremely convenient, extremely easy; you don't have to think very hard to do it."

Dotson said this is the type of use Ithaca Carshare hopes to encourage as it enters its second year. She envisions local businesses, and even municipalities, replacing company car fleets with Carshare memberships, and has already started discussions with Tompkins County and the City of Ithaca.

She is also investigating whether the cars could be used as part of a service subsidized by the Tompkins County Department of Social Services, for use by clients who need to get to job interviews or doctor's appointments.

Expansion will be measured, however, as the not-for-profit strives to become self-sufficient rather than relying on grants from agencies like the New York State Energy Research and Development Authority to plug early revenue gaps.

"Financially, we are definitely going in the right direction, but we don't want to overextend ourselves," Dotson said.

Ithaca Carshare board chair David Lieb said part of the group's mission has been to serve as a model for other areas in the state. Before its launch last June, only large metropolitan areas considered car sharing; since then, similar initiatives have started in Buffalo and Syracuse.

"I think it's proving something important," Lieb said. "It's proving that a carshare can be viable in a small urbanized area. We had to jump a lot of hurdles in the beginning, but it's really cleared the way for cities like Buffalo to be able to do it much more quickly, easily and cheaply."