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## Easy Going

By: Wendy Skinner

Imagine if you will: Two blocks from your home sits a clean, good-looking and gassed-up late-model car. You have reserved this car for a two-hour shopping trip. After dropping off your purchases at home, you return the car to its free parking space. You just spent about \$10 to run your errand. You hum a tune on your stroll back home as you contemplate your freedom from maintenance, insurance, parking, finance charges, devaluation, or the strange squeaks and suspicious burning smells that contribute to the worries and cost of personal car ownership.

In a world where real-life scenarios such as melting ice caps, acid in the raindrops and the coming depletion of our main source of energy rival any Twilight Zone script, it's time to imagine all sorts of new things. "Car sharing may sound strange for about 10 minutes, and then the environmental and economic logic of it sets in, and you realize it's a beautiful concept," said Daniel Roth, an ebullient car share proponent who is leading a movement to bring car sharing to Ithaca.

A "car share" is basically a per-hour rental system that gives qualified drivers access to a fleet of shared-use vehicles. Typically, a membership fee is required, as well as a refundable damage deposit. Car share members may then reserve a car as needed and pay a modest hourly rate for the time they use it. Larger car shares offer a variety of vehicles, from pick-up trucks to hybrid sedans to convertibles. The cars are chosen for durability, fuel efficiency and driver appeal, and are kept clean and in good mechanical condition.

"The principle of car sharing is simple: individuals gain the benefits of private cars without the costs and responsibilities," wrote Susan Shaheen, a highly-credentialed West Coast researcher who has been tracking car sharing here and in Europe (where it started) for more than a decade. Several studies confirm that, for urban car owners who drive less than 5,000 to 7,000 miles in a year, a car share membership is more economical. According to the American Automobile Association (AAA) and other sources, the real cost of owning a late-model car - once finance charges, insurance, fuel and other costs are figured in - is about a third more than the purchase price. Car owners seldom think about these "hidden" costs or the cost per trip of using their car.

Several successful car share operations - which may be large or small, for-profit or nonprofit, grassroots or corporate - have sprung up around the country in recent years. The U.S. car share enterprise as a whole has doubled its client base every year since 1998 and saw a 46 percent increase in users in 2005.

the right ingredients

Car shares work best in densely populated areas where scarce parking and heavy traffic are daily problems, and where services and shopping are within a short drive. It also helps to have a populace with a strong awareness of the environmental benefits of reducing automobile use. Sheehan noted: "Car shares . . . are more likely to thrive when environmental consciousness is high; driving disincentives such as high parking costs and traffic congestion are pervasive; car ownership costs are rather high; and alternative modes of transportation are easily accessible." An even more important element, adds Sheehan, is partnerships, such as those among businesses, government, public transit, neighborhood groups, colleges and universities, and grassroots organizers.

If this is starting to sound like a good fit for Ithaca, imagine a post-Redbud Woods community awareness galvanized by recent soaring gas prices and nourished by the constant encouragements of groups like Curb Your Car and Sustainable Tompkins. Add in a progressive public transit system, amenable government planners, interest from the campuses and as-yet shadowy financial backers, who are nevertheless watching from the wings.

The catalyst for an Ithaca car share may well be innovative social entrepreneur Dan Roth, a Cornell University graduate student living at EcoVillage at Ithaca. Roth sits on the executive board of the U.S. Partnership for the Decade of Education for Sustainable Development, an alliance of 300 organizations nationwide that works to incorporate sustainable development into all levels of education. An Albany transplant, Roth says he chose Ithaca as his home precisely because of its potential to become a model of sustainability.

With the help of a small grant awarded through the "Science for Sustainability" partnership between Ithaca College and EcoVillage, Roth brought together a well-rounded group of officials, activists, transportation experts, entrepreneurs and car share professionals for the first "Ithaca Car Share Summit" in late January. The event exuded possibility, and car share experts from San Francisco and Boulder, Colo., both asserted that Ithaca has "all the right ingredients" to support a successful car share.

Sharing Stories

Roth and the summit steering committee arranged for representatives from two very different car share operations to come to Ithaca to talk about their experiences getting started. Boulder's homegrown, all-volunteer car share operation has survived primarily because of the dedication and commitment of its founders and members, said Karen Worminghaus, head of Boulder CarShare. Donations of cars keep it going. The donated cars are added to the fleet, sold to support the operation or traded to local garages in exchange for maintenance services.

Boulder CarShare has five cars and 50 members. Its growth has been hampered by a lack of capital and little cooperation from the city government. Worminghaus speculated that the city is reluctant to provide more than nominal assistance because the car share doesn't fit local leaders' ideal image for the city. Boulder may be more inclined to partner with a larger national company, such as Zipcar or

Flexcar, said Worminghaus.

Even so, Boulder CarShare would likely continue, said Worminghaus, because the clientele would be different, and because its low overhead allows it to keep costs down. Boulder CarShare has a \$90 fee to join and a \$10 monthly membership fee. Trips cost 50 cents per mile, plus \$1 per hour.

San Francisco's City CarShare started as a funded pilot program. It was launched in 2000 with 40 members and a fleet of 12 lime-green new Beetles. "In retrospect, the Beetles weren't the best choice for a car share," said Director of Operations Amy Anton. "We had maintenance issues and some people found them difficult to drive." The great value of the Beetles was their visibility as a marketing tool. They were wonderful advertising for the new venture, which built its fleet with more reliable and fuel-efficient vehicles. "People joined for the Beetles. They stayed for the Hondas," Anton said.

City CarShare is also a not-for-profit operation, but with paid staff. A 24-hour automated reservation system allows members to reserve cars by phone or on the Web. Members generally get the car they want at the time they need it, said Anton. Last-minute reservations can usually be filled, too, but the choices are fewer. On-board technology records mileage for easy billing. City CarShare has provided cars in low-income neighborhoods with the help of funding from California's welfare-to-work initiative, and it has partnered with Bay Area Rapid Transit (BART) to park cars at transit stations.

Having sufficient capital, investing in reservation and tracking technology, and partnering with municipal entities, businesses and universities all contributed to City CarShare's success, said Anton. City CarShare charges monthly dues of \$10 and requires a \$300 refundable deposit. Use rates are \$4 an hour and 44 cents per mile. "The typical City CarShare member spends \$35 a month for trips," said Anton. "Owning a car costs an average of \$900 a month."

Could it happen here?

"This is the perfect time to be talking about this," said City of Ithaca Mayor Carolyn Peterson, who was invited to open the summit. "When we have discussions of urban density and urban core development, the first thing people bring up is 'traffic, traffic, traffic' - how do we reduce it and how do we encourage residents to use other means of transportation?" While not being specific, Peterson pledged that the City would be "a partner in this [car sharing] effort."

The Ithaca-Tompkins County Transportation Council, which does transportation planning and visioning for the Ithaca metropolitan area, has been researching car sharing as a transportation option for some time. "There is no magic bullet that will solve all our transportation problems," said director Fernando de Aragón at the summit, "but car sharing is one of those commonsense ideas that could work in the Ithaca urbanized area." The idea also parallels principals included in Tompkins County's comprehensive plan, said de Aragón. County Legislators Martha Robertson, Nathan Shinagawa and Kathy Luz Herrera, among others, have shown interest in the concept, perhaps as a County-community partnership or as a way to reduce the size and expense of the County's passenger car fleet.

Cornell University and Ithaca College (IC) were both represented at the Car Share Summit and participated in planning and funding the event. David Lieb, a transportation spokesperson for Cornell, said the university is interested in some form of car sharing that fits its needs. Marian Brown, of the IC provost's office, said college is studying the idea, as well.

Dwight Mengel, Service Development Manager for Tompkins Consolidated Area Transit (TCAT), which operates 40 bus routes in the area, was a member of the summit steering committee. Car sharing increases use of public transit - as well as walking and biking - because car share members tend to use several means of transportation to get to various destinations. "It's an important ancillary service that can complement and increase public transit ridership," observed Mengel. He added that while TCAT has followed a fairly conventional approach to transit, "we're looking at transportation in a new way."

An informal car share model has worked well for a group of neighbors at Ithaca's EcoVillage. There is a difference between "sharing a car," which is how Boulder CarShare got its start when five housemates sold all but one of their cars and figured out a way to share it, and "car sharing," which has come to mean an enterprise where an entity owns and has responsibility for the vehicles.

The informal sharing by EcoVillage residents of two privately owned vehicles, affectionately known as Spot and Rover, has "worked beautifully," said EcoVillage resident Liz Walker, but demand has exceeded capacity. "So many people here have given up their second or even their first cars, that it's been hard to meet everyone's needs," Walker said. Some residents at the co-housing complex have had success in sharing one vehicle between two families, "and there's a lot of car pooling," but Walker said the 90-person EcoVillage community is interested in having a more formal car share arrangement.

Roth is continuing to encourage the Ithaca community and its institutions to summon up the necessary ingredients to establish car sharing in neighborhoods, on campuses, at TCAT stops, by governments and businesses - wherever it makes sense. "Reducing our use of carbon-burning vehicles is the single most effective thing we can do to protect our atmosphere and air quality," Roth reminded everyone. "This is a doable, smart idea that fits our local philosophy. I think we can make it happen."

The next phase of the Ithaca Car Share initiative is to form a "collaborative implementation team," said Roth.

A meeting to found this team is being held from 7:30 to 9 p.m. on Feb. 8 in the Old Jail conference room, 125 East Court Street, Ithaca.

For more information on the meeting and car sharing possibilities for Ithaca, visit [www.ithacacarshare.org](http://www.ithacacarshare.org). Roth can be reached at [dnr6@cornell.edu](mailto:dnr6@cornell.edu).

Wendy Skinner lives in Ithaca. She is a member of Sustainable Tompkins and a frequent contributor to the Ithaca Times.

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