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Upstate NY program offers car sharing

By AP Wire

ITHACA, N.Y.—Faced with rising fuel prices, residents in this upstate New York city can rent a gas-efficient car by the hour through a new car sharing program designed as a model for other communities.

Even before the program's official debut on Wednesday, 60 people had joined Ithaca Carshare, said Jennifer Dotson, the program's executive director.

"As those members start driving cars around, we think many others will start thinking about how car sharing can save them money," said Dotson.

"People are starting to feel the pinch ... This can really help out a huge amount. It makes sense if we can share in the cost of operating these cars," she said.

The nonprofit organization will give members self-service, 24-hour access to six new Nissan hatchbacks. It will soon offer a pickup truck as well, Dotson said. Members can telephone or use an online reservation system to choose the vehicle they need at the time they need it. There's never any paperwork.

Vehicles are located at several locations around town -- mostly near bus stops -- including the Cornell University and Ithaca College campuses. Both schools are partners in the effort and plan to buy memberships for some faculty, staff and students in the fall semester, Dotson said.

Two membership plans are available. A "Just in Case" plan is directed at people who have only an occasional need for a vehicle. "It's My Car" caters to drivers who want to replace car ownership or need access to a second car.

Members pay an annual or monthly fee and then by the hour and mile for usage, which covers gas, insurance, cleaning, maintenance, and other vehicle ownership costs. Members are given key fobs that get them into the cars.

"People often don't consider all the hidden costs of owning a vehicle," said board member Marian Brown.

Industry reports put the average cost of owning a car in the United States at about \$650 a month, when the cost of fuel, insurance, upkeep, repairs and other payments are considered, Brown said.

Dotson added that the average car spends 95 percent of its time parked. Studies show that one shared vehicle can replace up to 15 privately owned vehicles, she said.

Car sharing helps the environment because members are more likely to get rid of a second car or do without one altogether, Dotson said.

Members are also likely to drive less often and become more deliberate about trips, she said.

Bob Wigden, a Cornell employee, has been depending on a motorized scooter and the bus system -- and now Ithaca Carshare -- since selling his fuel-efficient car after getting a large repair bill.

"I like the idea that it is causing you to be a little more disciplined in the scheduling of things," he said. "Rather than just running little errands whenever I want, I tend to combine them more."

The increasing price of gas has boosted membership in established car sharing operations around

the country.

There are nearly three dozen cities -- among them, Chicago, Cleveland, Philadelphia -- that have already started car sharing, Dotson said. One of the largest is PhillyCarShare in Philadelphia, which has 50,000 members and offers more than 20 makes of car, including a luxury BMW, a sporty Mazda Miata and the Toyota Prius hybrid.

Ithaca Carshare is the first community-wide, car sharing operation in upstate New York, said David Lieb, chairman of the organization's board.

A national for-profit car sharing chain, Zipcar, has four cars for students and staff from the University of Rochester and plans are in the works to expand to Syracuse University this fall. Also, a Syracuse-based real estate agent has contacted Ithaca Carshare about starting a car sharing program in Syracuse.

"We're trying to learn all the hard lessons now and have this 'car share in a box' available to other communities," Lieb said. "We've looked at that as an important part of what we're doing: to prove it can work in a small market and make it easier to work in other upstate cities."

The program was designed to be self-sustaining through membership fees, but its startup was helped by a \$150,000 grant from the New York State Energy Research and Development Authority, which wants the program to serve as a model.