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Sharing the ride

By Rebecca James

The Harrod family didn't replace its old rusty car when it died three years ago. Instead, they moved into downtown Ithaca where they could get to most places by bike or foot without polluting the world.

But sometimes even the most ardent environmentalist needs a car, like when Elisabeth Harrod wants to take one of her sons to a weekend birthday party outside of town or it's snowy and she wants a week's worth of groceries.

Starting next week, organizers expect Harrod and 50 other Ithaca residents to have cars parked around the city that they can rent by the hour. Ithaca Carshare is the first communitywide, car-sharing operation in Upstate New York and is designed to serve as a model for places such as Syracuse, Auburn and Oswego.

"We're trying to learn all the hard lessons now and have this 'carshare in a box' available to other communities," said David Lieb, Ithaca Carshare's board chair. "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."

Sutton Real Estate of Syracuse, which manages about 2,000 apartments, many of them rented by Syracuse University students, contacted Ithaca Carshare and wants to explore starting a car-sharing program.

"Since most of our properties are not within walking distance to the university, FOR-

we see this as an economical, environmentally friendly solution for transportation for our tenants," said Linda Charles, vice president of management.

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.

The rising price of gas has boosted membership in established car-sharing operations around the country.

One of the largest, PhillyCarShare in Philadelphia, reported this month that it signed up its 50,000th member. PhillyCarShare is so well established that it offers members more than 20 makes of car, including a luxury BMW, a sporty Mazda Miata or the Toyota Prius hybrid.

Ithaca Carshare is starting with six cars and a pickup truck and will add more vehicles, and park them at more locations, as more members join.

Unlike standard car rental, once you are a member, there's no paperwork and you can rent cars for as little as \$4.95 an hour. Members reserve cars online and are given key fobs that get them inside.

Harrod, 40, works part time and has two boys, Will, 9, and James, 7. While her friends will loan her cars and offer her and the boys rides, she wants to be able to take her turn in the carpool.

Car sharing helps the environment because members are more likely to get rid of a second car or do without one altogether, said Ithaca Carshare's Executive Director Jennifer Dotson.

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

Meanwhile, the rising price of gas makes people more conscious of the costs of keeping a car on the road.

"People are starting to think, 'How much is this trip to the grocery store going to cost me in gas,' " Dotson said. "Two years ago, we weren't thinking about that."

The rising price of gas has been on Bob Wigden's mind since the 1979 energy crisis. The Cornell University staff member first got a more fuel-efficient car, but he sold it last month after a large repair bill and is depending on his motorized scooter, the bus system and Ithaca Carshare.

"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."

It has taken years of planning to get Ithaca Carshare on the road, as organizers looked for affordable insurance, financing and other pieces of the puzzle.

It is designed to be self-sustaining through membership fees, but 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.

Both Cornell and Ithaca College, partners in the effort, are buying memberships for some faculty, staff and students in the fall semester, so membership should increase then, Dotson said.

Car sharing is designed to work with the public bus system to relieve congestion on roads and reduce the demand for parking. Carshare parking spaces are located near bus stops or in centrally located places.

"I hope it gets wildly popular," Harrod said. "I'd like to see more and more cars in the network and more and more people using them."