

Car sharing gains ground among drivers and local governments

By Sydney Schwartz

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When Maritza Mercado moved to Boston last fall, she wasn't ready to buy a car. She didn't want to deal with the cost of insurance and the hassle of parking. But Mercado realized that public transportation would not be adequate for carrying the furniture, television and groceries she needed to set up her apartment.

Mercado, a 22-year-old Spanish teacher, joined Zipcar, one of several car-sharing companies that have been growing in popularity in recent years and are changing the way some Americans look at vehicle use. Unlike rental car services, car-share services require membership and offer car use by the hour or by the day. The rates include gas and insurance.

When she needs a car, Mercado reserves one that is parked in her neighborhood through the Zipcar Web site. She uses a small card, called a Zipcard, to open the doors and starts the engine with a key in the vehicle. When she's finished with her errands, she returns the car to the same spot. Mercado pays \$50 a year and upward of \$8.50 for each hour that she uses the car, depending on the make and model.

"It's so freeing to go pick up the car, do all of your stuff and just park it and walk away," Mercado said. "You don't have to worry about anything."

Car sharing is gaining ground in the United States and Canada as a transportation alternative for urban residents or households that need a second car for a short trip to a meeting, the airport or the mall. About two-dozen companies provide almost 1,500 cars to more than 72,000 people in cities from New York to Toronto and from Seattle to St. Paul, Minn.

"More and more people are waking up to the fact that, you know what? For certain individuals who live in highly dense urban areas, it really is more cost beneficial to not own a car--provided that you can have one when you need one," said John Williams, spokesman for Flexcar, which provides more than 300 vehicles to nearly 20,000



Zipcar boasts more than 500 vehicles and 35,000 members in over 21 cities around the country. Dan Martin, the regional sales director for Zipcar New York, uses car sharing both for work and pleasure. (Ivan Karakashian/CNS)



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A Boston architecture firm has designed a Zipcar parking structure, modeled after a PEZ candy

members in cities on the West Coast and in Washington, D.C.

Car sharing has become so popular in Massachusetts that on April 1 the state hit Zipcar users in Boston with a \$10-per-year tax to go toward the new Boston Convention Center. The tax is also charged on car rentals and tourist tours. The move incensed car-sharing advocates who say the tax unfairly penalizes a service that reduces urban congestion and pollution.

Matthew Malloy, vice president of marketing for Zipcar, which is based in Cambridge, Mass., believes the tax intended for visitors is misplaced on Zipcar users.

“We could be nothing further than car rental,” he said. “Our focus is really on people who live in the city.”

Other states and municipalities have started to reward car-sharing companies with incentives like free parking spaces on the street and free advertising on public transportation. And some local governments have even become members themselves.

In the Washington suburbs of Alexandria and Arlington--the only region in the country where car-sharing companies compete--municipal governments pay membership fees for any residents who want to join Zipcar or Flexcar. Drivers in Oregon get free Flexcar credit if they agree to ditch cars that fail emissions tests in favor of car sharing.

In Philadelphia and Berkeley, Calif., city agencies have shed dozens of cars in their municipal fleets in favor of car sharing. And in Minnesota, where a new nonprofit car-sharing company called HourCar is set to open next month, state legislators are working on a bill that would give a tax credit to individuals and businesses that become car-share members and to local parking lots that agree to store HourCar vehicles.

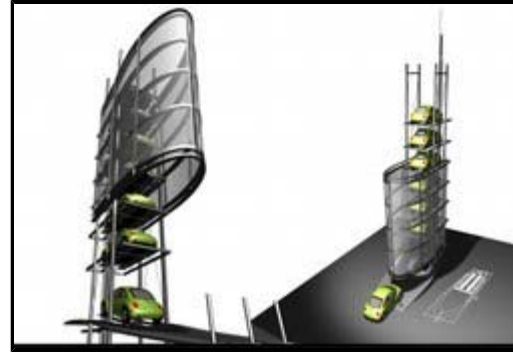
“These communities basically see Flexcar and car sharing as an extension of their own public transportation system,” said Lance Ayrault, president and CEO of Flexcar.

Car sharing is also changing the way urban dwellers and commuters look at automobile use.

“There’s a lot of behavioral change that occurs once an individual joins one of these programs,” said Susan Shaheen, a researcher at California's Partners for Advanced Transit and Highways.

Instead of taking a trip to the grocery store in the morning and a trip to the drug store at night, members of car-share programs are more likely to bundle those trips together, Shaheen said. Car-sharing researchers say members also do cost calculations to see whether it is cheaper to rent a car share to drive to Wal-Mart, take public transportation or walk to their corner grocery store, where they might pay more for milk.

dispenser, to save space and reduce parking costs in cities like Boston and New York. (Photo courtesy of Moskow Architects)



A Boston architecture firm has designed a Zipcar parking structure, modeled after a PEZ candy dispenser, to save space and reduce parking costs in cities like Boston and New York. (Photo courtesy of Moskow Architects)



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“It’s making people look much more rationally and sensibly at car use,” said Adam Millard-Ball, a senior associate at Nelson-Nygaard Consulting Associates who is working on a national study of car sharing.

Zipcar estimates that for each vehicle it puts in service, about 20 privately owned vehicles are taken off the road. The company claims that it saves members about \$435 a month on car, gas and insurance payments. A 2003 study of San Francisco’s nonprofit City CarShare by researchers at the University of California at Berkeley showed that car sharing reduces vehicle traffic by 13,000 miles and saves 720 gallons of gasoline daily. Since joining City CarShare, 30 percent of its members had sold one or more of their cars, according to the study.

But car sharing doesn’t work for everyone. All car-share companies charge by the hour, and some charge per mile, in effect discouraging use for long hours or distances. And day rates usually start at about \$60, the equivalent of renting a car.

“I just wanted more car use than it could give me,” said Julie Straus, a law student at Harvard who recently bought a car.

Straus is also concerned that there aren’t enough available cars in her neighborhood in Cambridge.

“Once I have to walk a mile, a half a mile, to get to a car, it doesn’t seem worth it anymore,” she said.

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