

Columnists

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Beyond Zipcar: Peer-to-peer car sharing may soon be here

More options are about to become available when it comes to car-sharing. Coming up: rentals through individual auto owners.

By Tom Watson

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When asked what the single most important thing is that the average Northwest resident can do to help the environment, many eco-experts answer with just two words: Drive less.

Cutting down on driving can be as simple as taking the bus, walking or riding a bike, but sustained reduction of car trips for an individual or household usually requires a multipronged approach. As the potential linchpin of a combined strategy to reduce driving, car sharing is speeding into the fast lane.

Q: Hasn't car sharing been around for a while?

A: Flexcar started the first mainstream car-sharing operation in Seattle in 2000. In 2007, Flexcar was acquired by Zipcar, the Massachusetts-based industry leader. Zipcar is currently the only major car-sharing service in the Seattle area. But car sharing appears to be on the verge of significant expansion, here and around the nation.

Q: How does car sharing work?

A: Instead of owning a car, you can rent a car by the hour when you need it, ideally picking it up at a convenient location.

Q: What are the benefits?

A: When we don't have our own car, or when our family gives up one of its cars, we tend to drive less. Any reduction in driving clearly reduces pollution and helps address global warming. Typically participants in car-sharing programs save money and get more exercise, since picking up the car often involves a little walking.

Q: What's happening locally in car sharing?

A: The most exciting news is that "peer-to-peer" car sharing should arrive in Washington state soon. Under the existing car-sharing model, Zipcar has more than 200 cars in its fleet that live at designated parking spots in Seattle, Bellevue and Redmond. Zipcar members can reserve those cars.

But with the peer-to-peer model, also known as personal vehicle sharing, anyone can make a car available, and the user picks up the car directly from the owner. Potential users look at listings

and photos of car choices online or on their phone, similar to a dating service. With this system, car sharing could become available in many more locations.

A bill in the Washington state Legislature, House Bill 2384, would clarify insurance protection for participants in peer-to-peer car-sharing programs. This bill has bipartisan support and is expected to pass by early March and then be signed by the governor.

Oregon approved similar legislation last summer, and a San Francisco-based peer-to-peer car-sharing company called Getaround launched its service in Portland this month. If the Washington bill passes, Getaround or other peer-to-peer car-sharing companies will likely begin operations in Seattle and statewide by early 2013.

Q: Would people really want to rent out their cars to strangers, or vice versa?

A: Just a few years ago, the answer would have been a resounding no. But thanks to the Internet and programs that include safeguards, Americans are becoming much more receptive to renting homes, cars and other possessions directly from individuals they don't know.

Peer-to-peer car sharing has already gained a following with both car borrowers and car owners in several cities. Getaround company officials say program participants in San Francisco renting out their personal car make an average profit of more than \$200 a month.

Car owners choose the rental rate for their vehicle, usually based on whether it's an old beater or a Rolls-Royce. Rates for peer-to-peer program cars often run between \$6 and \$9 an hour (compared with a local Zipcar standard rate of \$7.75 per hour, plus some small fees). The company operating the peer-to-peer car-sharing program usually takes a cut of up to 45 percent that covers its costs, including insurance.

If peer-to-peer car sharing really takes off, it could break new ground environmentally and socially. When the Beach Boys celebrated car culture in the 1960s and sang "I Get Around," this wasn't what they were talking about. But it might just make sense in the 21st century.

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