

## **More Area Car Owners Shift to Hourly Rentals**

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Matt Clausen's friends told him he was crazy. Absolutely nuts. How in the world did he and his wife expect to take care of a new baby if they got rid of their only car? How would they get to the doctor's office? See their friends?

Clausen harbored his own doubts, but he had also done some math. He was paying \$450 a year in insurance and \$800 in repairs, plus gas and other nagging costs. The hassle equation didn't add up, either: His station wagon broke down a lot, and he was sick of hunting for parking.

So he ditched the clunker and put his trust in Zipcar, one of two car-sharing companies in the Washington region that offer a range of vehicles for rent in increments as short as a half-hour.

Unlike traditional car rental outfits, car-sharing companies station small numbers of vehicles in neighborhoods across the region that users reserve online or by phone. They use electronic cards to get into cars and must return them to the reserved spots where they picked them up. Both companies in the Washington area, Zipcar and Flexcar, include gas, insurance and maintenance in their rates.

"It seemed like a car was more of a hassle than anything else," said Clausen, of Capitol Hill, who, with his wife, Margarita Diaz, spent about \$1,000 on Zipcar the first year they tried it. "I wanted to have the freedom of having a car around in case I needed it, but it ended up sitting out on the street all the time. Zipcar . . . tipped the scales for me."

Many people in the Washington region -- with its crowded neighborhoods, limited parking and nightmarish traffic -- have come to the same conclusion, turning it into a proving ground of whether Americans are amenable to the culture of car sharing.

The companies got their starts in Seattle and Boston, but the Washington region is the only place in the country where two car-sharing companies compete, and company officials confirm that it has quickly become one of their hottest markets. After three-plus years, the companies have stationed a combined 226 cars in the area and have signed up more than 14,000 members, nearly half of them in the past year.

Company executives and some local politicians and transportation officials say car sharing represents the future of how people will get around in congested cities.

"This is really kind of an urban solution," said Tim Vogel, a general manager for Flexcar. "Major cities are all headed in the direction where car ownership doesn't make sense at all."

The idea has worked in Europe for years, but for it to succeed in the United States, people will have to abandon a national culture obsessed with the notion that owning a car

provides independence and an identity for the more communal idea that people can save money and gain freedom by sharing.

"It's a big leap," said Dave Allen of the Seattle Department of Transportation, which provides 20 parking spots for Flexcar and subsidizes car sharing for up to a year. "People feel they need [a car], so we say, okay, why don't you try it for a month and see if you really need it. They find another culture they prefer of walking more and spending less time in their car."

Users say the services are handy for running to suburban stores, loading up on home improvement supplies, picking up a piece of furniture or visiting family and friends. Some businesses sign up to give employees a way to hustle between offices or pick up materials. Another perk, users add, is that they get to drive all kinds of cool cars.

"I drove a BMW for the first time in my life," Clausen said. "I've tried VW Bugs. I tried a convertible once."

Supporters say that car sharing benefits communities by reducing the number of drivers congesting city streets, polluting the air and circling like vultures for those ever-elusive parking spots. They say it works best in places with extensive public transportation systems and where residents are able to bike and walk a lot. Metro provides free parking spaces for the cars where available. The companies have cars at 66 of the 86 Metro stations.

Arlington County is one of those spots and has quickly become an aggressive backer of car sharing. The county provides 20 spots near Metro stops, and leaders plan to add more this year. The county has also just completed a year-long trial in which it spent \$30,000 to cover many car-sharing costs.

The results: Membership in the two companies jumped from 1,180 to 2,500, according to Chris Hamilton, the county's manager of commuter services. Hamilton added that a survey of 426 of those members found that about 70 percent said they saved money, felt more independent and had delayed buying a car. Half said they drove less, and a quarter said they sold one of their cars.

The City of Alexandria offers similar incentives, and officials in Greenbelt lease a vehicle from Zipcar for seniors at a complex with scant parking, charging residents \$1 an hour to use the car. District officials are also considering giving spots to the companies, and some developers offer the cars as an amenity for new residents.

As car sharing becomes more popular, the idea is running into resistance from people who don't view it as a solution to the parking crunch. Opponents also bristle at handing over prime public parking spots to private businesses.

"I'd love to be able to park close to my house as well," said Bertram Keller of Adams Morgan. "I disagree totally with anybody who thinks having these shared vehicles will make any dent at all in the parking situation in our neighborhood."

Users, on the other hand, say they love it. Wavely Veney, owner of an Internet marketing firm in Southwest Washington, said his Flexcar account provides him access to a fleet of vehicles that all his employees can use. He also said it's cheaper than owning a company car and insuring multiple drivers.

"If I owned the car, there'd be maintenance I'd have to pay for, gas I'd have to pay for, insurance," Veney said. Flexcar "just takes away all the hassle of it. It's perfect for me."

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