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## All the car--without all the fuss

### High gas prices, insurance costs, loan payments drive more city dwellers to ditch their wheels and turn to self-service car-sharing operations

By Bob Sector  
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Esther White doesn't own a car, but the Hyde Park grandmother grabbed a sedan off a lot near her apartment the other day and drove to church. About the same time, 31-year-old Kristen Pawlowski, also carless, slipped into a Mini Cooper she found parked at a North Side shopping complex and headed to Oak Brook.

Joy riders? Hardly.

In both cases, the wheels belonged to self-service car-sharing operations that have begun salting vehicles for hire in parking spots across the city. Customers access the cars by waving computer-coded smart cards over the windshield, making the rental experience about as simple as a trip to the neighborhood ATM.

The tab comes to about \$8 to \$9 an hour, insurance and gas included.

"When you sit and figure out the cost of car payments, parking, gas and insurance, it just seems this is a lot cheaper way to get around," said Pawlowski, a consultant who sold her old Saturn last summer.

Car sharing is a relatively new transportation niche, distinct from car rental agencies that cater to business and vacation travelers. It's geared toward urban commuters who know their way around a bus or train schedule, many of whom keep a seldom-used car at home.

The concept has spread to 57 cities and more than 100,000 customers in the U.S. and Canada in a decade. Venture capitalists are pouring money into car sharing, and two nationwide chains have sprung up. One of them, Boston-based Zipcar, recently entered the Chicago market. The city is also home to a 4-year-old service called I-GO, run by the non-profit Center for Neighborhood Technology.

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While I-GO and Zipcar have ambitious expansion plans, their combined fleets in Chicago number fewer than 200 vehicles. That's puny compared to the 1.3 million registered passenger cars parked on city streets or in garages each night.

But transportation experts think high gas prices could catalyze the car-sharing industry, setting it up for a big takeoff in congested urban centers where the expense and hassle of vehicle ownership can often trump the convenience.

### Ditching the headaches

Owning a car is a right of passage for Americans, and many city dwellers cling to vehicles when it makes little economic sense. The trick for advocates of car sharing is to convince urban residents they can ditch the keys painlessly.

"You can get many of the benefits of owning a private vehicle without the headaches," said car-sharing expert Susan Shaheen, a transportation scientist at the University of California at Berkeley.

Car sharing has long been popular in Europe, but the idea first took hold on this side of the Atlantic with environmental activists. One of the oldest operations is in rural Missouri, where the 15-member Dancing Rabbit Vehicle Cooperative shares two biodiesel-equipped Volkswagens and a Ford truck.

Shaheen said the idea quickly outgrew its "earthy, crunchy granola" stage as entrepreneurs realized the moneymaking potential and began marketing it as a service to complement the lifestyles and pocketbooks of city residents. She said the nationwide customer base is rapidly growing and could top 2 million in less than a decade.

"Cost-benefit-wise it's a no-brainer," said Mark Yoon, 24, a Lincoln Square resident who rents from I-GO two or three times a month to run errands or drive with friends to his favorite blues bar on the South Side.

Yoon says his monthly bills range from \$10 to \$150--far less than what car payments alone would be. He doesn't have to fill the tank, buy insurance or risk parking tickets. "Cars around here are simply more of a pain than they're worth," he said.

Mark Stinson, who lives in Roscoe Village, tried out a Zipcar Volvo the other day to meet a client of his advertising agency in Lake County. Stinson's wife needed the family car, and he had been thinking of getting a second one for just such occasions.

"I won't buy one now," he said, after returning the car to a lot five blocks from his home. "This is a clever idea."

Simplicity and convenience are the big selling points. That has been made possible through a convergence of wireless and computer technology that links a card reader in the windshield of each car with a reservation computer. The door unlocks only when the right customer swipes his smart card over the windshield. The key is inside.

That technology makes it possible for I-GO and Zipcar to scatter vehicles in parking lots across the city, Evanston and Oak Park. Some cars are in municipal or commercial lots, others under CTA tracks, others at grocery stores or hospitals.

`Almost like a personal car'

"The goal is to make it so simple to use that it feels almost like a personal car you're sharing with somebody else," said Zipcar President Scott Griffith.

All the technological wizardry in the world can't keep a car-share renter from returning a vehicle late and inconveniencing the next renter. But experts say car hogging happens surprisingly little because customers are charged by the hour, and repeat offenders can easily be booted out of the program.

I-GO sticks to utilitarian and eco-friendly vehicles like hybrids and boxy Honda Elements. I-GO CEO Sharon Feigon said her program has more than 3,000 regular customers, many of them single African-American women.

Zipcar has hybrids and compacts as well but also adds a pizzazz with Mini-Coopers, Volvos and even BMWs.

Shaheen has heard stories about customers hiring the snazzier cars to impress dates.

A high percentage of customers sell cars or put off decisions to buy them, Shaheen said. On average, car-share drivers rack up 44 percent less mileage than they would have in personal cars, her research shows.

When customers pay by the hour, they see how much each trip costs, and they tend to use the car more efficiently.

"My relatives thought I was nuts to get rid of my car," said Pawlowski.

But Pawlowski, who recently moved from Oak Park to Lincoln Park, said paying off and parking her car in the city would have cost \$5,000 a year.

"Car share," she said, "just makes more sense."

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