

That New Car Smell

Contract with Community Car extends UW's leadership in transportation

By Robert Chappell



SHARE AND SHARE ALIKE: Smart Motors' John P. Dolan (left) and Lance Lunsway of UW Transportation Services show off one of the university's new shared rides.

Photo by J. Mathews

Move over, buckyball & biotech: The University of Wisconsin-Madison is about to become famous for, believe it not, cars.

Yup, cars.

The university is leasing three new cars as part of a program that will surely bring, if not fame at least the sincere appreciation of local environmentally conscious types who care about things like energy conservation and global warming and the basic quality of life-as-we-know-it energy issues.

By way of explanation, UW Transportation Services director Lance Lunsway notes that the university has been a leader in energy-efficient transportation for a while now. For example, fifty percent of the university's faculty and staff use transportation other than their own cars. Which means these people helpfully reduce downtown traffic congestion, free up parking spaces, and decrease the sum total of harmful emissions. By contrast, Lunsway says, most campuses would be thrilled to have that figure hit twenty percent.

Still, he thinks the UW can do better. Among the transportation demand management strategies implemented since Lunsway came to Madison from Arizona State four years ago, for example, is the offer of free bus passes to all faculty, staff and students. Currently, nine thousand people use those passes to take eighty thousand free rides a month.

But there's one problem. You'd like to take the bus to campus in the morning, but you know you have errands to run between classes or on your lunch hour. So you have to drive, right?

Not anymore. After a year-long pilot, the university has signed a five-year contract with Madison-based Community Car to provide three shared cars on campus.

Community Car started in 2003 under the auspices of Madison Environmental Group by placing three cars around town and selling memberships allowing people to reserve and use the cars. A fourth vehicle, a Honda Civic, was parked in the ramp under Helen C. White Library on campus as a pilot to test carsharing service at UW, in a spot donated by the university.

That particular car was "hugely successful," says Community Car executive director Amanda White, and it soon became apparent that more cars on campus would be successful as well.

Lunsway was familiar with similar programs in Portland, Seattle and Boston, and sent out a nationwide request for proposals to get more shared cars on campus. Community Car came in with the best bid.

The contract was signed in September, and before the ink was dry the two new Priuses -- one at the University Hospital and one at the Biotech Building -- were on the road.

"We added thirty-five new members just in October," White says. "We have people turning in applications every day. People love the Priuses. They're being used every day. It's great for faculty and staff who want to leave their cars at home and bus, bike, walk, carpool. But it's also great for graduate students who maybe don't have cars on campus but need to get to East Towne or West Towne or visit Milwaukee for a day."

Membership rates range from \$4.50 to \$9.25 an hour -- but UW faculty, staff and students are first entitled to a free trial of five hours or fifty miles, and a reduced application fee. Those fees will, White and Lunsway hope, eventually allow the cars to support themselves -- Lunsway hopes that happens within three years -- but the university contract covers some of the start-up costs. "Insurance is very expensive for car sharing," White says, as are parking spots and gas. "For a small start-up company, it's hard to expand when those up-front costs are so high. Through the university contract, the UW is subsidizing the cars, and eventually, through member usage, the cars will support themselves."

In addition to support from the university, Community Car got a big boost from Smart Motors, which has donated use of the Priuses as a sort of working advertisement. "They just want to see people get into the hybrids and try them out," White says. "Smart Motors does the second-highest volume of hybrids in the nation. Some people use our cars as a second car for their homes. That works out for Smart because when they get a new first car, maybe they'll get a hybrid."

Early indications are that enough of those nine thousand free bus pass holders will use Community Car vehicles that two more cars will show up on campus every year for at least the next five years. Lunsway says likely spots for new cars in coming years will be the corner of Park and Regent streets, the engineering campus, and the Eagle Heights graduate student housing complex.

In the end, Lunsway says, Community Car will remain just a piece of the university's TDM puzzle, along with options like Madison Metro buses, state van pools, and expanded bicycle trails. That whole package has attracted its share of national attention, bringing transportation managers from as far away as the University of Maryland to learn from what Lunsway and company are doing. "We're one of the leaders in the industry right now," Lunsway says.

For detailed membership rates, visit www.communitycar.com or call 204-0000.