

San Francisco Chronicle

Why own a car when you can share one?

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February 10, 2015



Photo: Terray Sylvester / The Chronicle



IMAGE 1 OF 3

Enterprise CarShare vehicles are parked in the St. Mary's Square Garage in San Francisco. The service began operating last week in San Francisco, where there are a number of car-share companies to choose from.

Living car-free or car-light in San Francisco is increasingly easy — and it's not just thanks to Uber.

Car sharing is quietly spreading throughout the city, allowing people to rent cars by the hour or mile, pick them up at widely dispersed locations, reserve them with a smartphone, and unlock them with a phone or credit card.

“Technological advances are giving people new and convenient ways to get around more freely without having to own a car,” said CalPIRG spokeswoman Diane Forte, whose consumer group recently released [a report on the growth of high-tech transportation options nationwide](#). It found that San Francisco is a national leader in innovative ways to get around town, second only to Austin, Texas.

To support car sharing — and try to reduce car use — [San Francisco is experimenting with reserving up to 900 on-street parking spaces sprinkled throughout the city for the exclusive use of car-sharing vehicles](#). The three companies getting spaces over the two-year pilot program, which is being phased in slowly, are City CarShare, a nonprofit; Avis' Zipcar, perhaps the best-known service; and Getaround, a “peer-to-peer” service that helps regular people rent their cars to others.

Street presence

“It’s more flexible and convenient to have a street presence versus an off-street presence (such as in parking garages), where people may not be aware it’s there,” said Susan Shaheen, co-director of UC Berkeley’s Transportation Sustainability Research Center. Until recently, San Francisco has lagged cities such as Washington and New York by not having a street presence for car sharing.

However, most of the San Francisco car-share options are for round trips, making them less flexible than services in other cities that allow renters to drop off a car at their destination.

While cars on the street are easier for people to get to, car sharing in general takes time for people to grow accustomed to, said Rick Hutchinson, CEO of City CarShare, which has operated for 14 years and has 400 cars in San Francisco, Oakland and Berkeley.

“It’s very neighborhood dependent,” he said. “Some locations such as the Outer Sunset are doing really well, but it takes a long time for people to change their behaviors to do car share, especially if they previously owned a car.”

The latest entrant in San Francisco is [Enterprise CarShare](#), a branch of the traditional car-rental giant. It started last week in 20 locations throughout the city, all off street, although for now it’s not used much. At three locations that each had several cars, garage attendants said there had been little, if any, activity.

But Enterprise executives are gung-ho on car sharing’s potential. Enterprise CarShare has almost doubled its membership and spread to 30 new North American markets in the past year, they said.

All the high-tech transportation services represent “the second coming of the automobile,” said Thilo Koslowski, vice president and automotive practice leader at advisory firm Gartner in Santa Clara. “The business model the auto industry got used to for over a century won’t necessarily hold true for the future. People won’t have to own a vehicle and be tied to it.”

However, car ownership rates haven’t yet significantly declined. Koslowski and others say that could happen by the end of the decade. Once the trend starts, it will accelerate quickly, he said.

New ventures

Meanwhile, mainstream car companies are hedging their bets with new ventures and investments that tap into emerging ways to provide transport.

Enterprise Holdings, around for 55 years, is a case in point. Its executives are quick to note that the company trademarked the term “virtual car” in 1997. Enterprise has a range of ways to connect consumers with cars, including its traditional Enterprise Rent-A-Car, National Car Rental and Alamo Rent A Car brands, as well as a vanpool-like service, Zimrides, for arranging long-distance carpools (that company was the predecessor to Lyft, which spun it off to focus on on-demand rides) and CarShare.

<http://www.sfgate.com/business/article/Why-own-a-car-when-you-can-share-one-6073661.php>