



## Philly CarShare becomes well-traveled

**With 30,000 members in 5 years, it's a success story in its field.**

By Melissa Dribben

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You've seen them everywhere. In prime parking territory on Center City streets, in Ikea parking lots, at the Wegman's in Cherry Hill. Hybrids, Mini Coopers, trucks emblazoned Philly CarShare. "Our wheels. Your freedom."

Where do they come from?

Go back to March 2002. Five people meet in the lobby of the Doubletree Hotel in Philadelphia.

Tanya Seaman, 35 and Clayton Lane, 26, both city planners; Larry Shaeffer, a community activist; Eli Massar, who works for the Mural Arts Project; and Nate Robinson, an investment banker.

They are planning a kind of communal rental system for Philadelphia that will allow a single car to be used by multiple drivers every day. People who need the keys for just a couple of hours to get to a child's baseball game or meet a client for lunch or haul home a new microwave.

The efficiency, they hope, will result in fewer cars clogging streets and lungs.

The idea isn't original. (It grew out of an informal arrangement among some thrifty Swiss in 1947.) But it is still cutting-edge.

This meeting, after all, was held before *An Inconvenient Truth*, before the ozone hole grew big enough to swallow North America, and before any of the Doubletree Five knew how they would pay for the project that came to be known as Philly CarShare.

In the five years since that meeting, the nonprofit they founded has grown from a spindly legged foal of an idea to a racehorse of a business, generating \$10 million a year. The revenue pays for a small staff, the purchase and maintenance of the fleet, expansion and, when possible, a reduction in rates.

This month, the 30,000th member signed on, making Philly CarShare one of the most successful, fastest-growing programs of its kind in this country.

The five founders did it by digging into their own savings. They applied for a grant, flew to California to see how San Francisco ran its program, wrote up a membership contract, installed a software program, leased a Prius and a Toyota station wagon, and - on Nov. 7, 2002 - opened for business.

Seaman quit her job with the Center City District and became full-time manager of the project, unpaid for half a year. Robinson balanced the books. Shaeffer washed the cars. Lane oversaw marketing.

"In this region, one million people get to work without a car," Lane says. Not always by choice, he notes. Car ownership, duh, is expensive. Once you own one, it's only rational to drive it. You've already sunk money into the purchase, tax, tags and insurance.

"With car sharing, you flip it around," Lane says. "If you don't need to use the car, you avoid the cost."

Word spread. After the first year, there were 570 members and 13 cars. They negotiated with community associations, the city and businesses, and either rented or were given designated parking where the cars could "live." The Union League, Whole Foods and the Parking Authority gave them space. In Queen Village, someone donated a driveway.

At its hip new offices at Ninth and Sansom, a white-haired woman is asking the receptionist how to sign up.

"I happen to be 69 years old. Do I need a doctor's note?"

She doesn't. And her 18-year-old grandchildren can join, too. As long as they've been driving for two years with a clean record. Thus, the program's growing popularity on college campuses.

Of the 18 car-sharing programs in the United States, "I can't say who's the largest, but Philadelphia is among the top providers," says Susan Sheehan, a research scientist at the University of California, Berkeley, who studies car-sharing programs.

The main competition in town is Flexcar, a company operating in 14 cities. U-Haul also has instituted an hourly rental.

Philly CarShare has had a huge head-start. It has worked out a deal with SEPTA and

reimburses members for fares paid en route to a car-share pod. More than 700 businesses and law firms, including Blank Rome's offices in Philadelphia and Wilmington, have signed on.

One of Philly CarShare's advantages is the relationship it has with local government.

In 2004, it awarded Philly CarShare a contract that allows multiple departments to share cars, and then frees them up at night and on weekends for use by city residents.

As a result, Philadelphia was able to sell off 329 vehicles. Since the program started, the estimated saving in lower insurance costs, less use, and less abuse is \$6 million, according to Jeff Friedman, a consultant for the city's Office of Fleet Management.

Nationally, Sheehan says, studies show that each shared car takes six to 10 private vehicles off the road. Factor in the number of car purchases postponed or cancelled, and the number jumps to about 25.

At first, Philly CarShare required a \$350 security deposit and \$15 monthly fee, which put membership out of reach for a lot of people. So in 2005, prices dropped.

"When we eliminated the deposit, the growth rate doubled," Lane says. They ended the year with 2,900 members. Now they get almost that many new subscribers every two weeks.

Lani Bevacqua and Paul Bennett were still living in Paris when they signed on with Philly CarShare.

The couple knows about alternative forms of transportation. They once lived on a sailboat for a year, then settled in Europe, where they started a family and a company providing walking tours.

Their 1992 Saab was waiting for them back home.

In July, when they moved to an apartment off Pine Street, Bevacqua and Bennett used the car to shuttle back and forth from Ikea.

"We started to think what a waste of money it was," Bevacqua says. "I ran the numbers. Something was wrong with the transmission and the air conditioning. I realized it would cost \$1,000 for maintenance and yearly stuff and insurance. Not putting in gas in it. Just having the keys."

Without a car, a Center City family of five such as theirs would have to be highly organized and extremely motivated to reconnoiter a Saturday afternoon outing to Clark Park in West Philadelphia.

Last weekend, Bevacqua and Bennett demonstrated how it's done.

Three car seats were lined up by the front door in their small brick rowhouse.

"I'll be right back," Bennett said, setting out down Lombard Street.

He thought the car was parked at 21st Street but couldn't find it. So he took out his iPhone and speed-dialed Philly CarShare.

"Well," he sheepishly told the customer-service representative, "I'm not actually *in* it. I'm *looking* for it. Oh . . . 20th and Lombard? A parking garage on the north side? Great! Thanks very much."

Two minutes later, he found the burgundy Scion, his to use for the next two hours for a total of about \$10.

He parked next to the house. Bevacqua and the kids - Cleo, 3, Stella, 5, and Jade, 7 weeks - spilled forth. As he snapped them into car seats, Cleo turned to her mother.

"Is this car new, Mommy?"

Bevacqua laughed. "It's new to us!"

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### **Philly CarShare Facts**

**Fleet:** 450 cars, about half hybrids.

**Members:** 33,000.

**Cost:** There are several options and varying rates for businesses and residents.

It is free to join. All plans offer one free hour a month in a hybrid, free gas, reserved parking, and \$1 million insurance coverage, and charge 9 cents a mile.

With free membership, the weekday rates are \$4.90 per hour or \$49 per day, and weekends are \$6.90 per hour or \$59 per day.

With a \$15-a-month membership fee, weekdays are \$2.90 per hour or \$29 per day, and weekends are \$4.90 per hour or \$49 per day.

**Eligibility:** A valid license with a clean driving record for at least two years. "Clean" meaning none of the following: major moving violations, vehicular manslaughter, excessive moving violations, reckless driving or DUI.

However, 18- to 20-year-olds must have a perfectly clean record.

**Insurance:** In the event of an accident, there is a \$500 deductible, but an option for a zero deductible.

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