

Nonprofit hopes car sharing catches on

Program, already a hit in other cities, will provide leases by the hour.

By Claire Osborn
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A new nonprofit group thinks a car-sharing program that has flourished in cities like San Francisco and Washington — where going car-free is common — will succeed in Austin, too.

Austin CarShare plans to lease four cars and make them available for people to check out. Participants would pay \$4 per hour and 44 cents a mile to use one of the Toyota Scion xBs, along with a \$10-a-month membership fee and a \$300 deposit.

The group is targeting downtown residents and University of Texas students, faculty and staff members who don't have cars.

"This is a good way to fill the gap between car ownership and public transportation and other alternatives," said Elliott McFadden, the nonprofit's chairman.

Members must be 21 and will be able to reserve a car by phone or online, McFadden said. Members will use an electric key card to open a car parked downtown in a parking space or a garage, he said. The keys and a gas card would be inside the car, he added, and drivers are required to leave the car with at least a quarter tank of gas in it.

The nonprofit provides insurance.

McFadden, who runs a political consulting firm, said the nonprofit still needs to raise \$40,000 to have the cars available for lease by October. He said the group is raising money through individual contributions and talking to companies about underwriting the program.

A dozen other cities have nonprofit car-sharing programs.

CityCarShare started in San Francisco about five years ago and has more than 5,000 members and 140 vehicles, said Eliot Dobris, that program's marketing director. The average user in San Francisco spends \$25 to \$75 per month, and half of the nonprofit's members who owned cars have sold them, Dobris said.

PhillyCarShare in Philadelphia, launched in 2002, has about 2,500 members and 50 cars, said Tanya Seaman, one of the group's co-founders. She also is a member of the advisory board of Austin CarShare.

Other members of the Austin nonprofit's board include Chris Riley, a lawyer who is

chairman of the city's planning commission, and Brandi Clark, co-chairwoman of the Austin Sustainable Business Council and founder of the Austin EcoNetwork.

Austin City Council Member Lee Leffingwell said at a news conference announcing the program Monday that he hopes the city will support the program by providing free parking meter space downtown.

Jeff Strunk, an information technology administrator who works downtown, and his wife, Jessica Cassidy, a graduate student at the LBJ School of Public Affairs, were the first people to sign up for Austin CarShare on Monday.

They said they gave up their car in 2005 and ride their bikes to work but liked the nonprofit's idea.

"It's warm and fuzzy," Cassidy said.

More information about the program is available at www.austincarshare.org or by calling 448-4477.