Not Your Father's Carpool

BY SIGRID WRIGHT

SmartRide
REAL-TIME RIDESHARING

When 18-year-old Lauren Mok leaves her apartment in Isla Vista for classes across town at Santa Barbara City College (SBCC) and uses a smart phone app to offer a ride to a student she doesn't know, she occasionally reflects on something a professor said: "We're in the middle of a social revolution, where technology is changing the way we do everything. Even, it seems, activities as mundane as driving."

Mok is part of a pilot program using a new mobile application that matches carpoolers in real time: SmartRide. The program aims to tap into the river of cars driving between SBCC and Isla Vista—a corridor where bus ridership has increased so much in recent years that buses often exceed capacity and students are forced to wait for the next one.

Using the app, car owners and riders create a profile and log in when they want to offer a ride or catch one. They can schedule ahead or find someone who is ready to go, sorted by location. They see each other's photo and how they've been rated by other users, and then text or call to arrange where to meet. After the ride, both drivers and riders can rate each other and leave comments, which helps add to a sense of safety and community. The system also facilitates an electronic payment based on mileage.

This is the next generation of carsharing and ridesharing, which is

evolving beyond the familiar pre-arranged vanpools into a realm that is more instantaneous and free flowing—and even rethinks traditional car ownership. Heading to Santa Barbara Bowl for a concert and want to avoid parking hassles by catching a ride on the fly? There's an app for that. Want to rent a car just for an hour or two? Someone has that figured out, too. There's even a well-established network of services designed for visitors who want to travel to Santa Barbara car-free.

"Carpooling is the easiest way to effectively double the mpg of any car. It's the fastest, cheapest way to cut down on congestion and pollution, as there are people driving everywhere, but usually with just a driver and four empty seats," says Michael Chiacos, transportation manager at Community Environmental Council, which has partnered with Traffic Solutions to run the SmartRide program. "Rather than using scarce transportation dollars to build new roads or buy new buses, we make the existing system more efficient by using something that many people already have—a smart phone."

In truth, this evolution away from the one-car-per-person model has been underway for a while. In a few larger cities, commuters pick up passengers from a group of strangers on the side of the road to help share a toll booth fee or to meet a required minimum before entering a high-occupancy vehicle (HOV) lane—a practice called "casual carpooling" or "slugging." In recent years, the Internet has made it easier to match riders and drivers, both through formal services (like the one managed by the countywide Traffic Solutions) and informal services (like posting on Craigslist to catch a ride to the Bay Area).

What's new, however, is an explosion of tools and services that allow the user more flexibility and control. Not surprisingly, these often first gain popularity on college

campuses, where an innovative spirit is coupled with need—such as parking shortages or the cost of owning a car on a student budget.

"Campuses are on the bleeding edge of the early adoption of technology," says Jamey Wagner, program manager of the Transportation Alternatives Program at UCSB. "They are like little cities. At

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UCSB, we have approximately 4,500 faculty and staff and another 20,000 students—that's a large pool of potential drivers, day and night. And most of them are tech savvy."

UCSB has a long history of innovation in this area. In fact, another popular on-demand ridesharing program, Zimride, was founded by university alum Logan Green and has been used more than 6,000 times since it launched. UCSB was also the first in the UC system to put in place a car-sharing program, which over the last decade has matured into a small fleet of rent-by-the-hour cars now serviced by Zipcar.

"This helps those who can't afford a car or don't want to bring one on campus. For $7.50 an hour, you can go to a doctor's appointment, help a friend move, even make a late-night food run," says Wagner.

He notes that Zipcar lowered the minimum rental age from 24 to 18 years old, which may help Zipcar's automaker partners build brand loyalty among future car owners. This may be a necessity, as recent studies show that the percentage of new cars purchased by people ages 21 to 34 is dropping—from 38% of all new cars in 1985 to 27% in 2010, *The Atlantic* reports. Another survey indicates that 30% of people ages 18 to 34 say they would rather give up a car than give up their mobile phones or laptops.

Having easy access to a rental car helped Arjun Sarkar, alternative fuels coordinator at UCSB, in his goal to avoid adding a car when his two teen boys came of driving age. "We did a total role reversal, and one of the family cars became the primary car for my son. I became a multi-modal commuter, getting to my job on campus by bus or carpool, and then using the campus Zipcar once or twice a week when I needed to leave during the day.

"The first two or three weeks were the hardest, in terms of letting go of having my car at my disposal all the time. It got easier as I got familiar with the system; often booking with Zipcar the day or sometimes the hour I needed it. I realized I could get a car really quickly if I had an emergency." ☼

RIDE SHARING RESOURCES

Community Environmental Council: *cecsb.org*

SmartRide: *smartride.org*

Traffic Solutions: *trafficsolutions.info*

Transportation Alternatives Program at UCSB: *tap.ucsb.edu*

Zimride: *zimride.com*

Zipcar: *zipcar.com*

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