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COVER STORY

TRANSPORTATION

Finding spaces for car sharing

By Scott Wiener

The Municipal Transportation Agency recently began implementing an on-street car-sharing program to improve access to car sharing in San Francisco. The program has caused some controversy, given the many challenges surrounding parking in our city. However, this program is central to San Francisco's long-term transportation success. Studies suggest that car sharing will induce some residents to give up their cars, which will reduce competition for parking.

San Francisco car share parking spaces



Source: San Francisco Municipal Transportation Agency

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San Francisco's transportation trajectory — one that is highly reliant on private automobiles — is unsustainable. We've grown by 85,000 people since 2003 without making the necessary investments to improve our transit system. We are facing increased congestion, transit crowding and extreme competition for parking. This will only worsen because our population is expected to grow by another 150,000 people by 2040. We cannot sustain another 75,000 or 100,000 cars.

The only way to create a successful transportation future is to give people reliable and accessible alternatives to owning private cars. It's not about eliminating cars or making it impossible to drive. Many people need to drive. Yet, whether one drives, bikes, walks or uses transit, it's in all of our interest to have fewer cars on the road. If we take even 5 to 10 percent of the 463,000 registered vehicles in San Francisco off the road — by providing excellent alternatives to driving — we'll have 17,000 to 35,000 fewer vehicles in our city.

The studies are clear: Car sharing reduces car ownership. Each car-share vehicle is used by numerous people rather than the traditional model of one car serving one person or household. Because one car-share vehicle is accessed by many people, a car share's parking space is used more efficiently; that is, by dozens of neighbors instead of one or two. Studies show that up to 14 cars are removed from an area for each available car-sharing vehicle. Both parking availability and traffic flow will improve.

Our already scarce supply of car-sharing spaces is shrinking as parking lots and gas stations are developed into housing. We encourage developers to put publicly accessible car sharing in their developments — I authored legislation to make it easier for developers to do so. However, this will not produce enough publicly accessible car-sharing spots, and the spots it produces will be concentrated in just a few parts of the city. There are broad residential swaths of the city with no real access to car sharing.

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The MTA's on-street pilot car-share program has the potential to move the dial by allocating up to 900 parking spaces in San Francisco for car-share use. These spaces account for one-third of 1 percent of the city's 280,000 on-street spaces. By increasing the visibility and convenience of car sharing, MTA's partnerships with car-share providers will decrease car congestion and increase transit use, biking and walking. By providing alternatives to driving, organizations such as the nonprofit City CarShare (one of three partners in the MTA's on-street parking program) can take thousands more cars off the road. City CarShare alone hopes to reduce traffic by removing 20,000 cars from Bay Area roads by 2020.

Some have objected to the program as privatizing public space. However, the city has long allowed private entities to monopolize street parking spaces if the use serves a practical purpose. Private businesses reserve curb space to receive shipments. Passenger loading zones for taxis occupy space in front of hotels. Similarly, homeowners are permitted to eliminate on-street parking by privatizing curb space via a curb cut for a driveway. We allow these privatizations of curb space in an effort to balance our community's varied transportation needs. Allowing a small amount of curb space for car-sharing services is no different. Car sharing is a valuable service to the public.

I'm sensitive to the scarcity of on-street parking. For people who don't have garages, I know it can be a nightmare to look for parking. Easily accessible car sharing removes vehicles from a neighborhood and, in the long run, makes it easier to park.

Car sharing can reduce car dependency, thereby reducing our notorious — and growing — traffic problems. To offer the level of car sharing necessary to avoid increased congestion and parking problems, on-street car sharing is essential.

Scott Wiener is a member of the San Francisco Board of Supervisors. To comment, submit your letter to the editor at www.sfgate.com/submissions/et