

One man's story: A car-free year in Stowe

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By Eric Law

Like all other bets made over the cubicle during the workday, this one was supposed to be forgotten. However, I not only took the bet but clung to it like a squirrel's nut.

I had gone carless in Boston during college, shared a car with a girlfriend for nearly five years in Missoula, Mont., and even attempted to go carless on Martha's Vineyard in the dead of winter, so it is evident I was just looking for an excuse to go carless in a new locale.

My work colleagues may have underestimated my predisposition toward car independence, but I in turn greatly underestimated going carless in rural Vermont.

My lifestyle lends itself nicely to such a challenge. First and foremost, I have no kids. I don't live miles off the beaten path and, logistically speaking, I am perfectly situated in Stowe village. I am also an avid biker and runner, fully willing to travel great lengths. In fact, I can't imagine anything else I would rather do.

Too cold out? That's not a problem, considering the Green Mountain Transit Authority's Route 100 Com-muter goes right by my house and drops me off just a few feet from my Waterbury office Monday through Friday.

To hedge my bet even more, I am blessed with many friends who occasionally pass my centrally located home on their way to work, to the mountain, and anywhere else I may need to go.

The cubicle bet didn't stipulate I couldn't take motor-ized travel, or even that I couldn't drive someone else's car if the owner was in the passenger seat.

The challenge would be easily met if I could sell my Saab (which I did in a couple of weeks' time on craig-slist) and followed a few simple rules. Since the bet was not about skirting car payments, inconveniencing friends and family, or passing the cost of trans- portation to others, the following rules were meant to safeguard the original intent of the bet — which was simply to reduce the footprint of one person and ultimately society's.

The order of preferred transportation was public transportation (bus, train, or subway), commuting by bike, carpooling, and, yes, hitchhiking.

To be sensitive to other people's schedules and to not put people out, one has to be willing to hitchhike as a last resort. It is inevitable that you find yourself without a car and without an alternative, no matter the planning, and the last thing you want to do is call a friend at home to come to your rescue.

As it is, you are inconveniencing others when they accommodate your schedule without you knowing it. For example, many people will tell a white lie and say they are going your way even if they aren't if you ask them for help in a tight spot ("The car is in the shop") or an emergency ("The car is in the shop and my kid is sick"). I came to learn this silent act of kindness only after the fact.

You might have seen me from time to time walking from Stowe's lower village westward. You might even have contemplated giving me a ride if you hadn't had a car full of stuff or passengers, been late for work, or been taught by your parents never to pick up hitchhik-ers (even though they likely came from a generation of hitchhikers). There is no commentary here, other than we live in different times and Vermont folk of a past era never let me walk backward for more than 10 minutes.

Weekends were by far the toughest transition for me. Since I was relatively new to Stowe, most of my social networks were outside town. More often than not, I could not and would not travel outside town borders if I thought I would have to rely on a ride from a friend. I missed many events in a year-plus, but this was only a temporary situation where I could read and write as much as in college, learn every nook and cranny of my adopted town, and for the first time in a long time not rush through life.

I would like to say the lack of ready transportation allowed me to focus on all the important things in life, but I can report with confidence that simplifying alone — that is, going carless — is not the philosoph-ical remedy some people make it out to be.

With that said, it certainly doesn't impede personal growth.

One man's story: A car-free year in Stowe *(continued)*

The most important rule was to understand that my little experiment was not groundbreaking — surely this has been done by many others in Vermont in less convenient situations — and that I was not going to change the world by reducing my carbon footprint by a small fraction.

The best piece of advice came from a dear friend: “This is your selfish pursuit and you aren't doing this for a prize, so stop talking and just do it.” I may have failed at this level of humility, but in striving toward this goal I became more accessible, and so did my hidden curriculum — that we can all do something in very private ways to reduce our footprints, whether the impetus is to improve our personal finances amid rising energy prices, reducing global emissions, or simply to rid our dependence on foreign oil.

The trials and tribulations of living without a car (and a computer and TV, to pique your interest) for more than a year can't be summed up in a newspaper column. I saved some money from not having a car payment or insurance, but not as much as one may think, because I always tried to return favors. I'd like to think of myself as a giving person and enjoyable to be around, but the reality is that if you got a ride from someone and you didn't at the very least attempt

to pay your share, the offer may not be repeated. You don't want to burn bridges and lose friends when you are without a car.

Reactions to my year without a car ranged from intense interest to pure disdain. Most people were somewhere in the middle, intrigued but confused why I wanted to do it and if I was comfortable leaning on others. As much as I tried to limit my reliance on others, I was learning we Americans value independence, not necessarily interdependence.

After a year plus without a car, I took the money I saved and entered the Tour D'Isle in Montreal, an event that celebrates bike commuting. There seemingly couldn't have been a better event to culminate my experience, but for reasons that became clear to me over time, I didn't feel like celebrating. I had just bought a new car the previous week, but the purchase was taxing and anticlimactic and now I was celebrating my year without a car with the wrong event.

Something went terribly wrong or right this past year because I won the bet and still feel like I have failed.

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