

Ten Thousand Bicycles in Portland



A Portland, Oregon, woman saves enough money to go to Europe three weeks every year by using a bicycle as her mode of transportation rather than owning an automobile. "I use Flex Car if I need to carry something around that won't fit in my bike trailer," says Jessica Roberts of the Portland-based Bicycle Transportation Alliance. "I also use Flex Car a handful of times a year to do weekend trips."

The Flex Car Corporation is a private, for-profit company that rents out automobiles, minivans, and trucks, in convenient locations, for about \$8.00 - \$9.00 per hour, which covers gasoline, insurance, maintenance, parking, and emergency assistance.

She's not the only one biking to work. In 2005, the Portland Department of Transportation counted approximately 10,000 bicyclers crossing the four main river bridges on their way downtown in just three hours.

Also significant, public transit use has increased 85 percent since 1990. Approximately 45 percent of commuters going into downtown are taking the bus, light rail or streetcar, according to a 2005 survey by the Portland Business Alliance. Another three percent are car pooling, five percent are biking and three percent walking. In all, 56 percent of commuters have abandoned single-occupancy car trips.

Public transportation use in Portland is boosted by the 726 work sites that subsidize a portion, if not the entire cost, of bus and light rail fares for their employees. Many places of work offer this benefit to comply with the state's 1996 Eco Rule, which mandates that employers in Portland reduce single-occupancy vehicle trips to their worksite by 10 percent to reduce ozone pollution. The Eco Rule is part of a strategy to achieve compliance with the federal Clean Air Act.

The State of Oregon also curbed auto dependence in the state during the early 1970s by passing legislation that sets aside a certain percentage of highway funds for bicycle paths. Bicycling is also promoted by Portland's encouragement of mixed development, interspersing housing with shopping and work sites. "Nothing

can be built in the core, along main streets or in transit centers that is not mixed use, with retail storefront against the sidewalk and either housing or office space above," said Mary Volm, who works in communications with the City of Portland's Department of Transportation. "It's just easier to get around."

The Mayor of Portland, Tom Potter, is a strong supporter of a mayors' agreement to meet or beat the targets of the Kyoto Protocol, the international agreement to address climate disruption. So far, 212 mayors have signed the U.S. Mayor's Climate Protection Agreement.

Even before this mayors' agreement was drafted, Portland had a climate change agreement - the first local climate change agreement in the nation. The emissions reduction the city set out to reach in this agreement - 10 percent below 1990 levels by 2010 - was even more ambitious than the target suggested for the US in the Kyoto Protocol. The target suggested for the US, if we had ratified the Kyoto Protocol, was a reduction of seven percent of 1990 emissions by 2012.

The city still has a long way to go to meet its target, though it is making significant progress. Though its population has increased 25 percent since 1990, emissions were just a bit above 1990 levels in June of 2005. It shows just how much can be accomplished when citizens are hard at work on a local level.